Photo Frame

Short Stories

by

D. Kameswari

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Translated by

Saraswathy R.H.

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About the Translator

Mrs Saraswathy R. H. holds an M.A. (English) degreewith distinction from the Osmania University. She did her M.Phil from the English and Foreign Languages University (EFLU) Hyderabad. She is also a trained journalist who had a stint in the print media.

She is presently working as an Assistant Professor (C) Department of English, University College for Women, Koti, Hyderabad. She has presented many papers on English literature at national level seminars. Besides translation, her areas of interest include editing and freelance writing thanks to her journalistic background.She has edited 13 books with an eclectic range of themes like 'Ethics and Good Governance' to 'Weather Forecast' to 'History of Ancient India'. She started her stint as a translator under the aegis of Sahithya Akademi for PottiSriramulu University, Hyderabad. She has also translated for well-known NGO's like Asmita.

She has lectured at various institutions of repute including AP Judicial Academy and KendriyaVidyalaya,, to name a few. She continues, on invitation, to judge various national level debate, elocution and essay writing competitions.

Translator's Note

I have enjoyed the collection of short stories of Mrs D. Kameswari, first as a reader and next as a translator. In the said role I have tried to create a harmony between the two languages which come with all their complexities and in the process a cultural transfer in its widest possible sense has been facilitated.

A good translator is expected to interpret the writer's philosophy. The philosophy underlying the works of Mrs D.Kameswari is a brand of feminism without losing sight of the time tested values which form the pillars of a society that desires to provide a space for everyone.

Her stories appeal to all age groups and the characters are drawn from day to day life. The values she eschews may seem old fashioned but their relevance is timeless. She also takes bold strides as far as rights for elderly are concerned as can be seen from her some of her stories that deal with the problems faced by senior citizens who are held hostage to changing times and culture.

The fact that she is feminist with a humanist approach can be seen her short story 'The Other Side' where she looks at the travails and expectations of marital life from a male protagonist's point of view. The novelty of such an approach is bound to provide the

reader with a better understanding of the complexities of marital life.

She also expresses social problems with empathy and understanding that reflect her close study of the society and a desire to create an awareness among the readers, all the hope of making a difference for the better.

While not being didactic her stories certainly make the reader wake up to the realities and strive to make his/ her life more meaningful while giving the desired space to fellow beings.

A translator has to like the original work in order to do justice and succeed in the endeavour. I hope this translation mirrors just that.

- Saraswathy R.H
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FOREWORD

D. Kameswari has been a prolific writer since many decades. Her enthusiasm to communicate with her readers through her stories, her commitment to the craft of writing, her capacity to respond to the changing times and changing relationships is amazing. She has published a few hundred stories and most of them are dedicated to women. She has exhibited a very modern approach to women's problems even as early as the 1960s in her short fiction and novels. Her capacity to analyze various situations in familial relations, her lucid style, her command on the genre of short fiction have made her one of the leading women writers in Telugu. Her approach to a problem is not just presenting it; she attempts to give a solution to it, thus making her reader ponder over the issue. On the whole, she has been one of the few women writers who have never paused in writing and always ready to catch up with the times. As such it is highly commendable to bring out a translation of her works so that non-Telugu readers can also have the benefit of reading her.

In one sense, Kameswari is more amenable for translation than a few of her contemporaries. Her writing is mostly dialogue-centric and reads like a play. This particular translation brings out all those dramatic qualities of her writing with great clarity and lucidity. The translation is extremely readable and does justice to the original. The translator, Ms. Saraswati has done a commendable job. I congratulate both the author and the translator for this wonderful addition to the English translations of Telugu works.

- Dr. C.Mrunalini

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PREFACE

Change is the only constant factor in life. Change has never been as intriguing and as dramatic as it has been in the case of women in our society. A woman's quest for an identity independent of others and her desire to live life on her terms has not come easily. It has been an uphill journey but one worth the while. Women today have accomplished a lot , but they have had to adapt in more ways than one to fulfill their dreams.

My second book, 'Photo Frame and Other Stories' is a collection of 18 translated stories. The book depicts the problems women face even today in their various roles as daughters, wives, mothers and professionals.

The book is an attempt to depict woman then and now. The traditional thinking and perspective of the generation gone by contends with the modern thinking of today's women and her perspective.

Each one of these stories addresses these some of these issues and tries to come up with a solution wherever possible.

I firmly believe that literature is the only means that allows us to look back and see if there has been any improvement or development since the time gone by. It is this very belief that makes me project various issues faced by our gender through my stories.

This compilation is my contribution towards chronicling the present for the coming generation and to see if these stories have in some way been able to guide them towards a better quality of life.

I am thankful to Mrs. Saraswati Hanumankar who brought to life my stories written in Telugu.

I am also thankful to Dr. Mrunalini who wrote the Foreword for this book despite her busy schedule.

I would also like to thank Mrs. Jyothi Valaboju for taking up the responsibility of printing and publishing of the book.

- D. Kameswari

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1. Photo Frame

"Namaste Dadima, is Pavitra at home?" askedVishwas while bending down to touch Rajyalakshmi's feet.

"Oh Vishwas! Is it you? Please come. I think Pavitra is in the shower. I will call her. Come and sit here," she replied affectionately indicating to him to sit beside her.

"Is she still in the shower? She had asked me to come because Shravan has to be taken to the school-"

"Neelamma tell Pavithra that Vishwas Babu has come for her," Rajyalakshmi instructed the maid.

"It has been a long time since you came."

"Yes Dadima. I have been travelling. I was in Mumbai for about 10days. And by the time I come back from office it is past nine in the night. I am travelling on Sundays too. I am unable to come and see Shravan", he replied.

"You are right. These days even wife and husband who live under the same roof get to see each other only in the night. Spouses do not have time for each other. Each one of them seems to be living on their islands," said Rajyalakshmi in a sad tone.

Kalyani heard Vishwas' voice and came out said, "How are you Vishwas? You have come after a long time?" Vishwas touched her feet and asked, "How are you maji? Are you still going to college? When are the vacations going to commence?" "Though we are done with the exams we still have work to complete till the results are announced. Please have your breakfast. I am making dosas,"she said affectionately.

"I will be delighted to have the dosas prepared by you. Where is Shravan?"he enquired.

"Shravan," Kalyani called out to her grandson who was siiting with his grandfather on the first floor and watching cartoons on the TV. Shravan saw Vishwas and came running towards him shouting, "Daddy!" Vishwas lovingly picked up his son, hugged him tight, kissed him on both the cheeks and lovingly asked, "What were you doing?"

"I was watching cartoons. Daddy I will not talk to you. Why didn't you come last Sunday?"

"I was travelling. I had gone to Mumbai. Sorry, very sorry," Vishwas said while running his fingers through his son's mop of hair. Shravan held up two fingers and said "You were absent on two Sundays. So you have to buy me two ice-creams."

Vishwas laughed and said, "OK. Your wish is granted."

Pavitra came rushing and said, "Sorry for having kept you waiting." Vishwas looked at Pavitra who had just come out after a shower. She was dressed in a yellow coloured

handloom top, black coloured salwar and a flowery orange coloured chunni carelessly thrown across her shoulders.She was looking very fresh like a fragrant flower.Vishwas kept staring at her. She had clasped her hair with a clip, applied light coloured lipstick.She had a slung a big handloom bag on her shoulder. She was dressed so casually. She was always dressed in a simple way and that her speciality. She really never gave much thought to dressing up, but yet was always so well turned out. She was blessed with finely shaped eye-brows, luxuriant raven black hair, a healthy complexion, a nose face that would turn red at the slightest hint anger or hurt... a hurried gait, a friendly demeanour, sincerity that was expressed through frankness, the ability to handle any problem without losing composure and intelligence that was mirrored in her attractive eyes... these were the qualities that attracted Vishwas. Pavitra felt a little uncomfortable when she realised that Vishwas was watching her. She said, "Shall we make a move? The principal has given an appointment for 9 o'clock." "Have your breakfast and then leave," said Kalyani who was ready with the dosas. "Ma, we are running late.We have to be there at 9 sharp," Pavitra replied while gobbling a banana and washing it down with a glass of fresh fruit juice. "It's fine if you don't want breakfast. But Vishwas will have his breakfast. He loves dosas. Sit down Vishwas," replied Kalyani. "Ma, there is no time for breakfast," said Pavitra. "Just two minutes, Pavitra. Maji will be hurt if I do not have the dosas she so lovingly made for me," said Vishwas and stared eating. "Why don't you just say that you cannot resist dosas?" said Pavitra laughing.

"What's all this hurry? When did you comeVishwas? No one

told me about your coming" said Ranga Rao while coming down the stairs. Vishwas bent down to touch Ranga Rao's feet and said, "Sorry, I had my breakfast without waiting for you to join me. I came because I have to accompany Shravan to the school. I will definitely spend more time with you when I come the next time. Bye. Maji, No time for coffee." He washed his hands at the wash basin and walked behind Pavitra with his son in his arms.

After getting into the car Vishwas asked her, "In which school have you applied? You did not tell me anything." "I called you twice, but couldn't get through. I have applied to two schools. When I went to the first school, the principal said that both the parents have to come. I have clearly mentioned that I am a divorcee. Yet that stupid woman said that I have come with my husband. I got so angry that I asked her, 'which husband shall I come with?' She said that children who grow up with a single parent tend to have some problems..."

"Maybe she is right. But she cannot refuse admission on that ground. A mother can be the guardian..." replied Vishwas.

"I didn't understand the rules of that school. Now we are going to a school called 'Little Buds'. I think we better not tell them that we are divorced since you have no objection to attending parent teacher meetings. If we do not tell them that we are separated, then the question of with whom the child is staying will not arise."

"I think you are right. We both have agreed to take equal responsibility of our kid. I am always there whenever the need arises," he said kissing his son. Pavitra looked at both of them and felt relieved.

"Nursery admissions have become so complicated. Parents are interviewed, donations... too much. Sorry, I think you will be late to office. Sorry for that. I have taken a day off," said Pavitra.

"I will be late. So I think I better take a day off. Let us take Shravan for an outing. We will have lunch at some restaurant. It has been a long time since I got to spend quality time with Shravan."

"Daddy, I love you, daddy," said Shravan hugging his father.

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"Oh! You are up! You slept for a long time. Shall I brew some tea for you? Did you take a day off from office?"

"I was so tired that I slept like a log. Shravan and I decided to take leave from office since we both got delayed at the school. Later we took Shravan to a morning show and had lunch at a restaurant and came back. Granny please give me some tea," said Pavithra yawning.

"I will get you some tea in a few minutes," said Rajyalakshmi and disappeared into the kitchen. She emerged from the kitchen a few minutes later with two cups of tea. She handed over one cup to Pavithra who was sitting at the dining table. Rajyalakshmi too sat beside Pavithra and was watching her grand-daughter sip tea. One could notice that Rajyalakshmi was raring to ask Pavithra something.

"Did Shravan get admission in the school?" Rajaylakshmi wanted to ask something but ended up asking something else. "Why did you take Vishwas along with you,"? She asked very innocently, pretending as if she did not know why.

"These nursery school admissions are such a pain! They wanted both the parents to attend the interview. That's why I asked Vishwas to accompany me."

"Oh! I see! Don't they give admission if the child does not have a father,"? asked Rajyalakshmi pretending ignorance.

"Stupid rules! I did not ask. If I wanted to ask I could have and argued and had my way. But I thought that since Vishwas is anyway coming to see Shravan and he will not refuse to accompany me if I ask him, I took him along. I no longer have the patience to explain and convince each and everyone," answered Pavithra in a disgusted tone.

"May be the management feels that a child needs both the parents in order to have a familial atmosphere which is necessary for children to perform well in their studies," said Rajyalakshmi in a provocative voice.

"There are innumerable children growing up in the care of single parents. Are they all lagging behind in studies? The school managements just want to thrust their rules and regulations on us."

Rajyalakshmi silently looked at her granddaughter for a while before saying, "Pavithra, whenever I see you and Vishwas together I feel very surprised. We both seem happy in each other's company.No one will believe that you both are legally separated when one sees the way you both communicate with each other, laugh, talk and enjoy going out with each other. Let's forget others for a while. Even I cannot understand why you are separated when actually you both seem to be happy in each other's company? Vishwas is a nice person- he is so humble, kind and is so respectable towards us..."

"Yes! You will definitely think that he is very respectable because every time he sees you he bends down to touch your feet- that is why you think that he is good person- but I never said that he is not a good person," said Pavithra laughing.

"Then why did you divorce him. You could have been happily married," asked Rajyalakshmi.

"He is fine as a friend. But as a husband he failed to live up to my expectations. That is the reason for our separation. He should support me as a husband. Did he support me?" countered Pavithra.

"I just cannot understand your logic. You say that he is a good person and I can see that you both enjoy talking to each other. Where exactly is the problem then? I am confused. I am unable to understand the present generation. You people split up for insignificant issues. You girls have become arrogant due to the financial independence that you all enjoy. Is there a man without any flaws? Lord Rama himself is faulted for banishing his wife due to hearsay."

"Granny, you don't know these men. They will be on their best demeanour as long as they wooing the girl. They will go to any lengths to impress her. After marriage they bind the relation in a photoframe and thanks to their egos and the status that they enjoy as husbands they draw boundaries for the same. Nowhe is fine with me since I am no longer his wife. The moment they become husbands their expectations change and multiply..."

"Oh really! Don't you girls have expectations from your husbands? Don't you draw boundaries for them? Don't you expect your husband to live up to your expectations? A husband expects

certain things from his because he thinks that his wife is not an outsider. A wife also expects the same from the husband because she thinks he is her life partner. We always have expectations from the family and people who we think are very close to us. Do we have expectations from others, from outsiders? Will we try to live up to the expectations of someone who is not related to you?"

"You don't know anything granny," said Pavithra in an irritated tone.

"I know a lot dear. I may not be highly qualified like you but the quality of academics of our times is far more superior than yours. Our intermediate education is as good as a present day PG degree. But please remember that I have experience on my side. That experience has made me worldly wise. Anyway, coming back to the present issue, you were saying something about photoframe and such other things. Marriage is like a photo which has to be framed if it has to remain blemish free. A photo that is not framed becomes dirty, dog-eared, wrinkled and ultimately become unrecognisable and has to be finally discarded. If a marriage has to survive the then this 'photo' called marriage has to be framed in the institution called 'family'. The egos of the partners have to be buried under the glass frame and it is only then that marriages can brave the storms that are likely to rage..."

Pavithra looked at her grandmother in amazement. "Granny you are great. What a great interpretation! You are awesome! Good! Thanks for your great thinking... Don't tell this to Vishwas"said Pavithra, appreciating her grandmother's wisdom.

"I didn't say this to earn applause from you. It is just to make you ponder. Where will you find a nice person like Vishwas? Even

if you happen to find someone, you may end up saying that he no longer loves me, he is no longer interested in me..."

"Ok Stop! Granny we have had this kind of innumerable discussions in our house," said Pavithra.

"Yes, we have had this kind of discussions earlier too. But we failed in making you change your mind. As long as you are here you will not face any problems. But if you have to stay all alone while single handily managing a job and a child thenyou will understand the challenges that life throws at you. Here you are bereft of any responsibilities. Your parents are taking care of all your needs and hence you are able to progress professionally. You will not realise anything as long as your son is growing up in the loving care of his grandparents. You will realise the value of a husband when you have no support system," remarked Rajyalakshmi provocatively.

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"Amma, I am helpless. They are not kids who can be shouted at and made to fall in line. They are grown-ups, highly qualified, well placed individuals. What kind of advice can we give to such people," said Ranga Rao in a sad and detached tone. All this happened after Pavithra came back to her parent's home. Rajyalakshmi had voiced her concern at Pavithra's return.

"What is the use of us elders in the family if we cannot make her see the realities of life? We have to talk to her and drive some sense into her head," said Rajaylaksmi.

"Can we ever drill some sense into her head? Today's generation is always ready with answers for everything. We asked her. Didn't

we? What was her answer? She said that they are unable to get along. So they have decided to part amicably.This was what she said the first day she landed her."

"She said that she had fallen in love with him. We had warned her saying that she will have problems adjusting to their culture and lifestyle. Did she ever heed advice? Why did you think our elders talk of compatibility in terms of castes and cultures? Why would anyone change or ignore their culture and lifestyle for someone else?" muttered Rajyalakshmi.

"Amma, there is nothng we can do about this generation. They refuse to make an effort to understand what and why the elders are saying. We try we show them the right path but they insist on going their way and unfortunately are ending up in a cesspool. They have to realise their mistakes and make efforts to undo the harm they have caused to themselves."

"They are not the only ones who are suffering because of their hasty decisions. Along with them we too have to suffer. Their decisions do have a bearing on the reputation of the family. Can we ignore that fact?"

This was the discussion that took place in Pavithra's maternal home a few days after she had left her in-laws place for good. A year and half had passed since then. Pavithra and Vishwas were introduced to each other by common friends. They became good friends, then became lovers, had a whirlwind courtship and got married within a year of their first meeting. They lived together as husband and wife for about two and half years. Within three years everything was over and she like a boomerang came back to her maternal home. The only difference was that she had gone single and came back with a son.

"You could have adjusted atleast for the sake of your son. How can you separate the child from his father?" counselled Kalyani. "No problem. I can take of the child myself. I have not separated the child from his father.Vishwas will visit Shravan once a week. We have decided that we both will be equally responsible for the child's welfare," said Pavithra very casually.

"Do you know that it will be very difficult for you to remarry since you have the responsibility of a child," said Kalyani.

"I am not eager to remarry," quipped Pavithra in an irritated voice. "If ever I change my mind and wish to remarry I will not marry a person who will not accept my child," said Pavithra very confidently.

Ranga Rao tried to counsel his daughter. "Pavithra, don't take a hasty decision. Think over it. You knew everything about Vishwas and then you took the decision to marry. Now it is not right to say that you are unable to adjust with them. Vishwas is a nice person. It will be foolishness on your part if you decide to split from him."

"Daddy, I have tried, for two and half years, to adjust. And in the process of trying to adjust I have lost my peace of mind. I am not blaming anyone. It is not a big deal to adjust to an environment we are not used to. I thought that I will adjust for the sake of Vishwas. But experience has shown me that it is not all that easy to adjust. I had no peace of mind. I hated the idea of giving importance to silly things. In the process of adjusting, my profession and career starting suffering. It is then I realised that adjustment was impossible..." explained Pavithra.

"That is precisely why elders used to take all aspects of a marriage proposal into consideration before giving their consent," added Rajyalakshmi.

Kalyani had warned her daughter before the marriage itself. 'Vishwas is a Marwadi- joint family-a business family. Vishwas is helping his father and elder brother in their business. He stays with his parents, his elder brother and his wife. They all live together as a joint family.Their culture is entirely different from ours. The daughters-in-law are expected to stay at home and take care of the family. They have to listen to the dictates of the mother-in-law. She will call the shots at home.The daughters-in-law have to fall in line without as much as a murmur. You have been bought up in a totally different kind of an ambience. You are used to a carefree lifestyle. Do you think you can adjust in a joint family? Very few women in their culture pursue any kind of profession outside the four walls of their homes. Do you think you will be able to cope with such drastic changes in your lifestyle? Did you seriously think about these issues?"

"Vishwas has told everything about me to his people. When I visited their house I told them very clearly that it is impossible to give my job. It is a joint family. But they all seemed very nice to me. They have servants to take care of everything. I will go to office in the morning and come back in the night. So where is the time to have any kind of misunderstandings? Even if there is some problem, I can rely upon Vishwas to solve the same. I think I can adjust for the Vishwas' sake," assured Pavithra.

After this assurance there was no reason to raise any objection to the proposal. The only objection was that

Vishwas was not a Telugu boy. Otherwise he was perfectly acceptable for Pavithra's family. He had a MBA degree. He was the Executive Director of their pharmaceutical company where his father was the Chairman and his elder brother was the Managing Director. They owned a palatial house, a fleet of cars and were generally counted as a wealthy lot.

Ranga Rao performed his daughter's marriage on a grand scale. He spent beyond his means, but befitting the status of the groom's family. The rituals of the both the sides were strictly followed during the wedding.On the wedding night Pavithra innocently asked Vishwas, "Do you people have very soft spines?" Vishwas was taken aback. He looked at her with a bewildered look on his face. "Yes! How do you people manage to bend so many times in a day to touch the feet of the elders? The moment you spot someone, if someone comes home, first thing in the morning, before retiring to bed, before going out, on festivals, for poojas and if you get married, you promptly bend and touch the feet. I already have a catch in my waist for I have bent so many times that I have lost count." Vishwas burst into laughter. "Oh God! Is it so? I got scared when you started talking of soft spines. That is our tradition. We express our respect towards the elders by touching their feet. I think it is a good thing to do so."

"I am not used to this kind of custom. I don't know how I will manage," said Pavithra worriedly.

"It is not a big issue and this not the time to talk about it," said Vishwas naughtily.

They both did not realise that these small issues wouldsnowball into tricky issues and will rob them of their peace of mind and create a wide chasm in their lives.

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"Pavithra... are you free this evening? Shall we go out somewhere? I want to talk to you. Can you come with Shravan to Lumbini Park? Since it is a Sunday, I assume you are free," said Vishwas calling after two months. "Why don't you come home?" answered Pavithra lazily.

"No. Not at home. We cannot talk freely. Come to Lumbini Park in the evening. Bring Shravan along. We can talk and also go out for dinner."

Pavithra and Shravan reached Lumbini Park. Vishwas played with his son for some time and then left him to mingle with other kids. "Pavithra, Ihave a very good job offer. I am planning to take up the same," he said very enthusiastically.

"Why do you want to work for some other firm? Is there any problem?" asked Pavithra, sounding very surprised.

"If I take up a job elsewhere, I can stay independently..."

Pavithra was taken aback. "You want to stay independently, you mean separately. .Why? What happened? What made you take such a decision?"

"I took this decision for your sake. For our sake..." he replied. Pavithra's face turned red. "If only you had taken this decision earlier, we wouldn't have had all these problems. What is point in taking such a decision now? It's too late," said Pavithra in a disappointed tone.

"Please Pavithra, don't say that. I have understood that it is 'Better late than never'. Staying away from you makes me very unhappy. You can never imagine how much I am missing Shravan since the past one year. Pavithra, let us live together. I will never get a better wife than you. And I have realised this after our separation. The love and camaraderie

between us is intact. We do not have any animosity between us Let us give our relationship another chance. We have been staying separately for over a year. We have understood where we had gone wrong. And I am sure we will not repeat those mistakes. Let us atleast try," said Vishwas sincerely. Pavithra was trying to internalise his words.

"Will your people accept this? Have you told them? What did they say?"

"They will never agree. No parent will accept it. Especially in our business community if a son sets up his own establishment it is viewed as an insult. That is the reason why I could not dare to do what I intend to do now. While working for my family business I could not have broken way from the family and that too immediately after our wedding. Despite knowing that you were finding it very difficult to adjust, I was helpless. I was struck between my loyalties towards you and my family."

"But now...?" asked Pavithra gingerly.

"Now I need not feel guilty because I will be working for someone else. I told this to my father. I could see he was hurt- mother was equally hurt- she suggested that I should marry a girl from my community, someone who stays at home- I have been able to convince my father- he has agreed to our setting up a separated home- but he is unwilling to allow me to leave our family business and take up a job elsewhere- he said, 'you will have your share in the family business, don't work elsewhere, if you want live with Pavithra, I am fine with your moving out from the joint family'- but please think twice before taking any decision'. Mother will come around in a few days. I am sure she will definitely understand me."

"For my sake why should you leave your family? I will feel guilty..."

"That is what I like about you Pavithra. Your greatness is that if things are not going as per your expectationsor needs you hold yourself responsible and never blame the others.Any other girl in your place would have blamed my mother and other family members. I know that my mother and sisters-in-law have often hurt you by their words. Yet you never said anything against them and on the contrary held yourself responsible for not being able to adjust to our lifestyle. You did not want to set up our own family because you said it would lead to a lot of unpleasantness. I could not support you in those days because I could not change my thinking and neither could I dare to break away from my family because I was still dependent on them- But now I cannot imagine any other woman as my wife. I have realised your value after you left- That is why now I have taken this bold step- If you want me work for some organisation I will do it or if you want me continue in my family business, I will continue, since this what my father too wants me to do. Pavithra, please do not turn down this prayer. If not for me, then atleast for the sake of Shravan," said Vishwas taking Pavithra's hands into his. "Pavithra, I love you. It is now that have I realised how much I love you," confessed Vishwas. Pavithra's eyes turned moist. "Vishwas, I must tell you something. The fact that we are separated has not registered in my mind till date. Every night as I lie in bed waiting to fall asleep, I keep asking myself, 'why did we separate? I have realised that it is due to only ego clashes and nothing else. The other day my grandmother said something that really set me thinking. She said that 'a marriage is like a photo, a picture which has to be framed and enclosed within a glass sheet. Only then the photos will remain new. If it is not framed, then within no time it is bound to get dirtied, wrinkled and finally has to

be discarded- Spouses have to stay within the frame and bury their egos under the frame, if they want the marriage to last just as a framed photograph lasts only when it is framed.' She has given the mantra for making the marriage work. I have been mulling over her words since then."

"She is great lady. Our elders' advice is based on their life experiences and if only the younger generation heeds their words then life would be easy.Her wisdom is really a blessing for us," he said with silent admiration for Pavithra's grandmother.

"My grandmother is very fond of you. He has a very good opinion of you. She keeps telling me that I cannot get a better life partner than you."

"So let us first break this good news to her," he said happily.

* * *

"Granny, I am going to remarry soon," said Pavithra hugging her grandmother who was seated in the hall. Vishwas was standing at the threshold. Rajyalakshmi's face changed turned ashen.

Rajyalakshmi anxiously asked Pavithra, "Remarry? Who? Whom? This is so sudden. Where did you meet this great person whom you wish to marry?" her voice did not hide her disapproval of the impending marriage.

"I am marrying a person who you have already certified as 'a good person', said Pavithra winking at her grandmother. Rajyalakshmi was confused. Vishwas came in and touched her feet.

"I am that blessed person, Dadiji. I had let go of her due to my foolishness. But now I have realised what a blunder I had committed and now want to remarry Pavithra." Rajyalakshmi's happiness knew no boundaries.

"You are in the good books of my granny because you constantly go on touching her feet. Now stop this drama," said Pavithra. "Shut up! Atleast now you should open your eyes and realise what a wonderful person Vishwas is. What a bomb you dropped on me, Pavithra! I was shell shocked for a minute. I was thinking, 'now what kind of a person has she chosen to marry?'

"Granny, I am already thirty. I do not have the time or the inclination to look for another person, fall in love, courting and finally marriage. So when Vishwas proposed, I immediately agreed. 'Aknown devil is better than an unknown angel' isn't it?" said Pavithra, laughing merrily.

"Dadaji, I proposed to her because I too don't have the patience to search another girl. And watch how she is posturing because I went down on my knees to propose to her," remarked Vishwas, playfully. Rajyalakshmi pulled them close to her bosom, placed her hands on their heads and blessed them saying, "May you both be always happy together."

(Photo Frame - Patrika, Anniversary Special Issue, November 2005)

2. Honey Bee

Nithya asked her sister-in-law, Mahima, "You keepsaying that your friend Akhila is very intelligent, active and smart. Is she beautiful too?" Mahima looked at Nithya with an expression of surprise and suspicion written large on her face, while asking, "why are you asking such a question?"

"Well! Nothing serious really. Just tell me, is she good looking? I haven't ever seen her. It's just out of curiosity, because her husband happens to be my boss. That's all."

"Akhila is not a stunning beauty, but has a smiling and attractive countenance, thick luxuriant hair… and above all, she is blessed with expressive eyes. Anyone who looks at her will realise that she is intelligent and attractive. She is into her forties yet she maintains a svelte figure. Her chirpy and lively nature made her the centre of attraction during our college days. To top it all she is a good friend."

"Despite being blessed with such a lovely wife…why is there this kind of behaviour…?" Nithya stopped herself from saying anything further. Mahima looked at her sharply and said, "What is it that you were saying?"

Nithya tried to dodge her sister-in-law by saying, "No, Nothing."

Comeon! Nithya! Don't try to fool me. I know that you are not asking just for the heck of it. Tell me honestly. Who are you taking about and what is the problem?"

"A girl called Medha joined my office a few months ago. Right now she is the Personal Secretary of Karthik Sir."

"So?" said Mahima looking at her sister-in-law, quizzically. Mahima hesitantly said, "Karthik Sir and Medha are quite close to each other."

"Come on! Nithya, Karthik is not that kind of a person. Akihla and Karthik are a happy couple. He is not a youngster either. He is well into his forties, father of two college going kids. I think you are mistaken. You said that Medha is his PA right? Hence they need to interact with each other quite often." countered Mahima.

"Well! I do know how much of interaction is necessary. But I am not the only one who is saying these things. A lot of others in my office too seem to find this entire thing very shady. Earlier a girl named Sowmya was his PA and she was a very dignified and a thorough professional. But this Medha seems to be a fish of a different kettle," said Nithya.

"Is there anything that lead you all arrive at such a conclusion? Has anyone witnessed anything unusual or are you all just assuming or imagining that something is brewing between Karthik and Medha?" asked Mahima.

"My colleague, Anant had gone to restaurant this Sunday with his family and there he spotted Karthik and Medha having dinner. Karthik was taken aback. Our receptionist Lalitha, saw them both enjoying a drive in Karthik's car. Well! Forget these people, I myself saw both of …" Nithya stopped herself from further saying anything.

"What did you see?" asked Mahima, her eyes narrowing. Nithya hesitated. Finally, she blurted out, "one day our programme analyst said that the CD relating to my project was on the boss' table. I went to pick up the same.I was under the impression that Karthik Sir had not yet come to office and entered his cabin without knocking. Sir was sitting in his chair and Medha was standing behind him with her arms entwined around his neck. They both were exchanging sweet nothings. I was shocked and so were they. I swirled around and ran out of the cabin."

Mahima was in a state of utter disbelief. She stammered, "Really? Karthik…."

"Yes, it's true. Right during the office hours, so boldly… fortunately Karthik sir does know that I am related to his wife's best friend. I found it extremely embarrassed to see his face after that incident. He came out of the cabin and threw an angry look at me and walked off in a huff."

Mahima turned pale. "How shameful! Despite being blessed with a lovely wife and teenage kids how could he behave in this despicable way? It is very unbecoming of a person of his stature."

"But why is Akhila keeping quiet" asked Nithya.

"She must unaware of all these affairs that are going on in the office."

"Yes. She might not read the SMS' sent to her phone."

"SMS', who sent them and how do you know about them" asked Mahima in a surprised tone.

"I sent them. I could not bring myself to be a silent spectator

to all these unholy happenings. I did not want Akhila to remain in the dark. So I sent her these messages continuously for three days. Later on what kind of step she wishes to take is left her choice. If she had seen these messages, she would have tried to contact me at least out of curiosity to know who had sent her these SMS'."

"Though it was right on your part to apprise Akhila of these sordid happenings, I only hope we have not ended up hurting her. I think you should have taken me into confidence. Poor Akhila! On second thoughts I feel that you should not sent those messages to Akhila…"

"But I think a wife has a right to know of her husband's demeanour outside of his home." Mahima looked completely confused and said "Well! Let me think and see if I can find a way out."

* * *

Akhila was going through the accumulated messages in her phone and while deleting the ones that were no longer necessary to be saved she came across a message that used English alphabets to convey information in Telugu. Akhila was intrigued and immediately started reading the same. The message cryptically said "Are you aware of the affair your husband is having with his secretary Medha? Wake up. Your well-wisher". Akhila looked for the date on which it was sent. It was sent more than four days ago. The message was from an unknown number. She hesitated for a minute but did not delete the message. Instead she saved it and continued reading more messages, she found two more messages dated the day before yesterday and yesterday. The messages were from the same number with the warning repeated. Yesterday's message had an additional

line which read "Do not treat this as a joke. Wake up to the truth." Akhila saved these three messages and deleted the rest. One receives a number of messages, advertisements, jokes and other offers from various sources, thought Ahkila, but she rarely found time to go through these messages. Usually on the way to her office, while travellingin her official vehicle, she would go through her inbox and delete the unnecessary messages. The forty- minute journey to her office was generally spent in reading her emails, checking out the missed calls and messages. Due to her grinding routine as a housewife who wakes up at 5.30 in the morning, prepares different kinds for beverages, breakfast and lunchboxes for four members of her family, and then metamorphose into a corporate employee, she rarely found time to have a proper breakfast at home. She would hurriedly pack a few sandwiches and a banana and gulped them down while simultaneously reading the day'snewspaper in the car on the way to work. Her professional work left her with no time for anything else to do. After completing the day's work and travelling back home wading through the dense traffic that took about an hour or sometimes more, she would reach home and slip into her role as a housewife and complete all the household work expected of her. Ahkila was one among the thousands of working women multi-tasking, which left them with very little time to even read the kind of messages that she had received.

Akhila tried to ignore that message as a prank played some perverted mind. Yet she could not remain unaffected. She neither had the time nor the energy to even to find out whether it was true or not. Yet without her knowledge, the message and its import had found a place in her mind and heart.

⁂

"Hello! I received a message from your number. Will you kindly identify yourself and tell me as to why you have sent such a message?" asked Akhila.

Silence greeted Akhila. "Hello! Please, who are you, and are you playing games with me"? said Akhila losing her cool. "Who are you and what are you upto"?

"Ma'am, I stand to gain nothing by playing games with you. As a well-wisher I thought I should let you know. Whether you wish believe or disbelieve is up to you."

"Who are you and how do you know these things?" A moment's silence followed from the other side.

"It is not necessary for you to know either my identity or how I know these things. It is for you to check out the facts that I have brought to your notice." The phone was promptly disconnected from the other side. Akhila kept aside her phone and started thinking. 'It was a woman who spoke to me. Maybe there is an element of truth in what the messages say. If it was a man, I could have treated it as a prank call. Calling the unknown number did not solve the problem' thought Akhila. On the contrary it made her more confused and worried.

* * *

Akhila was sitting at the dining table having dinner along with her husband and children. The messages kept swirling in her mind. She kept staring at her husband's face. Karthik was jovially conversing with his son and daughter. "Dad, I want a Scooty. I am finding it difficult to travel by autos because sometimes autos are not available or they refuse to take me where I want to go" said Mughda, a student of second year engineering. "Scooty and that too in in

this Hyderabad traffic.? No wa! It is not safe." Karthik was trying to pacify his daughter.

"Dad. Do you know that IIT entrance exams dates have been announced? These exams are to be held ten days after our ten-plus two exams. There is hardly any time for preparation" said Maanav feeling tensed about the forthcoming exams. "But it is always so. These entrance exams are held one after the other. That's why I forced you to join coaching classes while you were still in the first year. By the way how is your preparation going on?" asked Karthik. Well settled, forty-four year old Karthik seemed to be the ideal father, husband and the head of the family. No one would ever suspect that he was a double faced Janus. Perfect family man in the eyes of the society, but an incorrigible flirt within the precincts of his office. Akhila was quietly having her dinner, completely lost in her thoughts. Karthik looked at his wife and said, "You look dull today. Are you unwell?" Akhila looked straight into his eyes without answering him. Karthik faltered at and asked again, "anything wrong"?

"Well! Nothing really. But you seem different from what I have known you all these years" she replied.

Karthik felt flustered but quickly recovered and replied mischievously, "Do I look different. Have I sprouted horns on my head?" Akhila too replied in a jocular manner. "Exactly. I too am wondering as to how come you have grown horns at this age."

"Mom. Stop teasing Daddy" said Mughda who was her father's pet.

"Mughda, these days your dad is looking young and dashing. I have been wondering about this sudden change in his appearance and I think I have figured out the secret today."

Karthik turned pale.

"Stop ribbing dad. My daddy is always the same, I find no change in him whatsoever" supported Mughda.

"You cannot notice the change since you are a kid. I am his wife and I can easily decipher the change."

"Dad, what is mom saying? I am not able to follow what she is saying."

"I don't know either. You ask your mom" answered Karthik putting up a brave face.

* * *

"Thank God! You remember me. Where did you disappear all these days? No phone calls, no messages, absolutely no news from you. We seem to have lost the human touch and turned into robots. Though we reside in the same city we are unable to talk to each at least once a month or meet up once in few months," rattled off Akhila. "Ok. Stop. Very smart, eh! You are the one who rarely calls or finds time to meet" said Mahima.

"Sorry, I know it's my fault. These jobs you know!They suck you of all your energy. That way you are lucky. Being a lecturer you have lot of free time on your hands in addition to a number of holidays. People like me who pursued engineering and MS are to be pitied for we are stuck in a grind."

"OK. This is a never ending problem. I have to see you. When can we meet?'

"Shall we meet next Sunday? We will catch up on a movie at I-max.?"

"That's a great idea. It's been a long time since we saw a movie together. Shall we also bring the kids along?"

"No. Let's both of us meet this time. Forget movie. We can always watch them anytime. Let's meet at Lumbini Park. We can talk to our hearts content and catch up on a lot of things."

"Mahima, you are OK? Is there any problem?" enquired Akhila sounding concerned and worried.

"Oh! I am absolutely fine. We will meet then. Make it by 6 sharp. See you. Bye" said Mahima and immediately disconnected thephone.

* * *

"So, you want to ignore everything despite knowing what Karthik is doing." For the past half an hour both the friends were discussing Karthik's extra-marital affair. "If you make sure that Karthik knows that you are fully aware of his dalliances, he would certainly put an end to this sordid affair" said Mahima.

"Mahi, I think you used the right word 'sordid affair'. I find the whole thing so disgusting that I don't even feel like talking, leave alone even think of Karthik's flings. Just let him go to hell! If I confront him it will lead to lies, arguments, anger and frustration. I have to think of my teenage children, they will be disturbed, their studies will be affected and there will be no peace at home. If I confront him with proof of his flings and if he says 'it's my life and I will live it my way' then what do I do? It is better to pretend that I know nothing and retain my dignity instead of letting him know that I am aware of everything and yet am helpless."

Mahima was surprised. "If someone like you who is highly qualified and well-settled feels that it is better to let sleeping dogs lie, then imagine the plight of ordinary women."

"Mahi, be practical. What do want me to do? Kick up an argument, fight with my husband and separate from him? At this point of time in my life, what do you think I will gain by separating from husband? I have to think of my two teenage kids, their education, and their future. I cannot afford to jeopardise their lives.You think I can manage all these things all by myself. My children are quite attached to their father. The separation can be very devastating for them. They might end up not only blaming me but also hating me for wrenching them from their father. My personal problems might start having an adverse on my professional life. As it is there is immense work pressure. Added to this if the atmosphere at home is equally unbearable…. I think I should let things be instead of losing my peace of mind. These men and their affairs are short lived you know. Who hasn't heard about the 'seven-year itch.' A few years into marriage and a couple of children later, they start looking for pleasure outside marriage. Karthik has been afflicted with this 'itch' rather late. I think they are basically try to check whether they are still appealing to younger women and if they are capable of any romantic feelings. That's why I think they get into these kinds of extra marital affairs. I remember some psychologist saying something to this effect. Some kind of madness, I guess. And there are girls like Medha who exploit this madness in men to further their interests. These 'itches' have a very short shelf life. I think most men would not be willing to cast aside their families for sake of these few moments of illicit pleasures. These flings are a passing farce, a break from the routine and the familiar. A wife enjoys a place of respect in the society which the

other woman can never lay claim to. Don't we see the honey bee flitting from flower to flower in search of nectar. It is the same with some men too. So there no point in losing my precious peace of mind and sleep for these kind of aberrations."

"God! It's surprising to see strong women like you become so defeatist. Shocking is the right word, I think".

"Mahi, go home take your own time to think over it. All I want is peace at home. I don't want problems, tensions and unpleasantness at home" said Akhila quietly.

"I am just wondering about what we are turning into. Today we neither have the time nor the inclination to take remedial steps when a spouse is going astray. Human relations seem to be taking a beating in our mad rush to make a thumping success of our material lives. The love, intimacy and trust that a wife and husband should enjoy seems no longer seem to exist. The pain, humiliation and the anger that a wife normally would feel when she realises that her husband is two timing her is becoming a thing of the past. Nothing seems to matter any longer other than pursuit of degrees, jobs and money. Have we become so detached that we have started feeling that things are best left as they are? This is so mind-boggling."

"Earlier wives would move heaven and earth to save their marriages. They would cry, sulk, threaten involve rest of the family members and generally play the victim. Do you want me to be like them?"" said Akhila light-heartedly.

"No. But how can you be so passive and detached, as if it simply does not concern you"?

"So you think that Karthik should not be allowed to get away so easily? Then I suggest you request Nithya to send a few messages to Karthik which say that your wife Akhila is having an affair with her boss. No, no not boss. Boss is an old man. Let me see who is smart and romantic in my office. Yes. Aditya Agarwal. 'Akhila is fooling around with this Aditya fellow. Wake up and smell coffee'. Let her send these kind of messages, so that we pay Karthik in his own coin."

Mahima was shocked. "Mahi! Don't be shocked. Just do as I have suggested and leave the rest to me. As you said that Karthik should not be allowed to go scot free, but at the same time I don't want to disturb the peace at home. Husbands should be taught never take their wives for granted"said Ahkila.

"Mahima was still trying to comprehend when Akhila got up from the bench and said, "Take it easy, but don't forget to have the messages sent. Now come let's go. It's getting late."

* * *

It was five days since Mahima and Akhila had met each other. Akhila had noticed that for the past three days Karthik was not his usual self. He looked angry, irritated, hesitant, doubting, worried and lost. He would steal glances at Akhila, trying to ask her something and then withdrawing into his shell, defeated and dejected. Finally, Akhila, while applying moisturiser on her face and hands casually asked him, "You are not your usual self. Are you feeling unwell?"

"I am fine" answered Karthik gruffly. "Any problem in the office?" she again asked. "You are my problem," Karthik

wanted to hit out but could not muster enough courage to say so. "Well! If you don't want tell me, it's fine," she said while adjusting the pillows on the bed, getting ready to sleep. "You are the one who should be telling" said Karthik angrily. "What is it you are saying? I am not able to follow you" said Akhila sounding very innocent.

"What does this mean?" asked Karthik taking out his mobile phone and showed a message to his wife.

"Well! Some idle mind has sent this and why should I lend respectability to such messages by answering your question." Akhila said.

"There is no smoke without fire" said Karthik looking her exasperated. "Ok! What you are saying is true, but one could have gone out for lunch with a colleague, or for a long drive in a car or spent some time together in a park" said Akhila sounding cool and unruffled.

"So you accept that you have been going out for movies, restaurants, drives and parks with a male colleague," asked Karthik sounding triumphant.

"Yeah! You can take it that way. We too are working like you men. We too get bored with the daily routine. Being human beings, we too appreciate some change and might sometimes go to a club or anywhere else with a colleague just for thrill and welcome diversion. What's wrong in asking for a change from our monotonous lives? Don't you men go out with your female friends or colleagues?" asked Akhila looking straight into his eyes.

"So you are trying to compete with men. You have gone as far as going out with a male colleague just for some thrill or relaxation. Am I right?" interrogated Karthik.

"Yes. All these while women were confined to their homes. They had no escape from monotony. They had no access to the outside world. In spite of knowing that their husbands were having extra-marital affairs, they were helpless. Things have now changed. Women are equally qualified, well-placed and when opportunities present themselves, why should women not make use of them"? asked Akhila, livid with anger. Karthik was taken aback. She continued with her tirade, "Can't women also have this 'seven-year itch'? You men get bored with your wives after a few years of marriage and hanker for pleasures out of homes and marriages. Why should you men alone feel entitled to thrills in life. Why should women deny themselves the diversions that come their way and continue to lead dull and drab lives? Why are we expected to be immune to the 'seven-year itch'?"

"So these messages are not lies?"

"Well! If you want to assume that they are true, so it be. I too received these kind of messages. But I ignored them. If you think that I am lying, then take a look at these messages in my inbox"said Akhila, while showing him the messages that she had received. Karthik's face was ashen.

"Did I bother to enquire who this 'Medha' is? There should be no trust issues between a husband and a wife. I am not an old fashioned housewife who confronts her husband, raises a hue and cry and finally ends up washing the dirty linen in public. All I want is peace at home. I do not have the where with all to endure tensions. I see no point in slugging it out in front of my grown up children. I do not wish to drag them into this quagmire and see them hurt and become insecure. If they come to know about your 'affair' they are bound to be disturbed and distracted from their studies. We might be their

parents but that does not give us the right to jeopardise their future."

"Did you believe that these messages to be true?" asked Karthik wanting to offer an excuse.

"We owe no explanation to anyone except our conscience. It will not take much time to find out the truth. As your legally wedded wife I am entitled to a huge amount as alimony in case I file for a divorce. But suffice to say that one should not forget the promises made to each during the marriage nuptials." Akhila sounding grave and hurt.

Karthik could not look into his wife's eyes. He managed to meekly say, "So there is no truth in the messages I received." There was a hint to hope in his voice that these messages were the handiwork of some perverted mind. "You should tell me if there is any truth in the messages. It is not for me to answer this question," said Ahkila sounding confident. Karthik did not respond immediately. A few seconds later he managed to gather himself together, put his arm around his wife's shoulder and said, "OK. Let's forget the whole thing. As you said 'let's not lose our peace of mind over these messages. C'mon let's delete them."

"It is easier said than done. Can one delete them from the mind and heart?" said Akhila calmly pushing away his arm from her shoulder. She continued firmly "From today you have forfeited the right to even touch me. But we will continue to be wife and husband in the eyes of the society. We will continue to be parents to our children. We shall continue to play these roles with aplomb. If a husband who strays has the right to suspect and interrogate his wife,

then a wife too has the right to punish the husband for going astray. I have nothing more to say beyond this." Karthik did know how to react. He mutely watched his wife adjust the pillows and go to sleep.

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Ten days later, Mahima called. "Hey! Do you know that Medha has been transferred to another branch?" "Now I know" laughed Akhila.

(Madhupam - Navya (Weekly) 30th March, 2011)

3. To Be Continued...

Today is Valentine's Day. Lover's day. A day whendiscotheques, pubs, hotels and florists make brisk business. Do lovers exclusively need a day to profess love? Does that imply that on the rest of the days they are not in love? Valentine's Day is one of the recent imports from the western world. Parents Day, Mother's Day, Father's Day, Brother's Day... it is fine for people in those countries where such days are celebrated because family members there rarely stay under one roof and hence get to meet each other on such occasions. But do we need traditions in our country where the parents with their children still together, where family values are strongly cherished and nourished. What does the Valentines' Day mean? It translates into pubs overflowing with drinks, discos reverberating with ear shattering music, drunk couples dancing away the night.

These were the thoughts swarming in the mind of Rama. It was 1.30 AM. Rama was tossing and turning in her bed, unable to sleep, waiting for her daughter to come home. Her daughter had declared that she was going, along with her friends to a party at a hotel. Rama knew very well that she could not stop her daughter from going to the party. She set a curfew of 12 o'clock. Her daughter

laughed with disdain, threw back her hair and walked away clicking her high heels. The girl never came home before 12 AM. Rama thought that she was doing her duty by asking her daughter to come home early. Rama used to be tensed every time the girl went out. Despite knowing that her daughter never stiuck to time she was asked to come home, Rama would stay awake till the girl came home, open the door and show her displeasure by banging the door shut and walking into her bedroom without a word. This happened countless number of times.

Today is Valentine's Day. It was past 2.10 AM. The girl had not yet come home. Rama was becoming restless. She did not want to disturb her husband by constantly tossing and turning in bed. So at 1 Am itself she had come to her daughter's room and tried to get some sleep. "Let her come home! I am going to give her a piece of my mind." She was fuming with impotent rage. "Can I really succeed in conveying my concern to her?" If the mother utters one word, the daughter is ready with stream of words. "Don't be silly mom! If I don't go out with my friends, who do you think I will go out with? You? You suffer from paranoia. Just look around you. The world has changed. Mom, I am a twenty-five year, working woman. Don't treat me like a teenager and try to control me. If I hang out with boys, does it mean that I am having an affair with them? Mom, just grow1"

The cell phone rang. 'It must be her. I am sure she is going to say that she will be late' Rama assumed. She picked the mobile. It was from an unknown number.

"Hello!"

"Is it Mrs Rama?"

"Yes... Yes! Who are you?" Rama was terrified on receiving a call from a stranger that too when it was well past mid-night.

"I am SI Janardhan calling from Jubilee Hills police station". Her heart missed a beat.She could barely speak.

"Police station? What? Why"? stammered Rama.

"Bhavana is your daughter? Right?"

"Yes! What happened to Bhavana"? Rama literally shouted into the mouthpiece.

"Your husband and you must come to the police station immediately."

"But why? What happened? What did my daughter do? Please tell me!"

"We raided a pub and your daughter who was drunk and was dancing with the boys there was caught. Please come immediately" said the Sub-Inspector and promptly disconnected the call.

The phone slipped out from her hands. She started sweating profusely. She ran into her bedroom to wake up her husband. Prasad was fast asleep.She woke him and it took him some time to comprehend what she was saying. He became pale and finally with a sigh got up and changed his clothes.

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"Sorry sir! I think the children went overboard because today is Valentine's Day as you know. Please, if you register a case and take them into custody... you know their future

will be destroyed. Please think on those lines. I request you, please," Prasad kept repeating these words, not knowing how else to handle this unexpected event. A few such other parents too kept on saying the same thing to the officer on duty.

"Please listen to me. Till I entered into the scene and rounded up your children, did you people, as parents know that you are expected to keep your children under control? That too girls! If your daughters drink and dance with boys and don't come before midnights, don't you think you should do something about that? If something untoward happens, then you people will be the first ones to accuse us of not performing our duty conscientiously. Please allow us to do our duty. Since it is our responsibility to first inform the parents, we called you all. Now nothing is in our hands. Tomorrow is Sunday. We will produce your children in the courts on Monday. You can then try for the bail," said the SI with exasperation.

"Please inspector. Since this the first time, and being Valentine's Day, the children seemed have gone overboard. Please forgive them," begged the helpless parents.

"This is the first time? Is it?" replied the officer, his voice dripping with sarcasm. "Ask them, if this is the first time" he said pointing to the offenders who stood quietly, their heads hanging in shame. Not one of them could say that the officer was lying. Prasad was shocked. Rama was taken aback. She stared at her daughter, with anger and suspicion. Bhavana stood without uttering a word.

"Yeah! Ask them if I am lying. Ask them if this is the first time. Earlier too I had once raided and rounded up these same

boys and girls. Since it was the first time, and keeping in view their future, I had left them off with a warning. The pub owner too was given a stern warning. But the warnings seem to have fallen on deaf ears. Just look at their audacity! They have gone ahead and done what they were warned not to do. What is the time now? It is past 2.30 AM. You people seem to be blissfully unaware that your children are not home yet. You let them loose, and now come and lecture to me about reputation, future and all such stuff" replied the officer. Neither the parents nor their children had anything to say in their defence. They stood speechless, heads hanging in shame.

"I thought it was a get together at some hotel. I have been trying to call my daughter since 12 o'clock. There was no answer. Later it was switched off. I have been sleepless waiting for her," said Rama trying to convince the cop that they are not as irresponsible as he is painting them to be.

"Madam, we have to perform our duty. We will file a FIR and produce them in the court on Monday. Please come on Monday and do as you please. Constable! Note down everybody's names, addresses and phone numbers. Confiscate all the offenders' cell phones," ordered the officer. The parents were shocked. They looked at each other, not knowing what to do.

"Please wait a minute. Allow me to talk to the Commissioner. He is a very close friend of mine. Please wait till I speak to him," said a parent who happened to be a highly placed government official. He immediately started calling the Commissioner without wasting a second.

The Inspector became livid with anger. "Sir! Look here. It is not fair on your part to use your influence and stop us

from performing our duty. Don't you think that by doing so, you are indirectly encouraging your children to turn truants. You are implicitly telling your children that they can take law into their hands and get away with it because you are ever ready to bail them out."

The parents kept silent, their faces expressing shame and helplessness. "Sorry Inspector! You are right! But please think about their future. There are girls too in this group. If the news leaks out and their photos get published, the chances of their getting married..." said a worried mother.

"Oh! Girls! And their marriages! Did you not earlier think about these things, madam, before allowing them to loaf around the city till well past midnight? Did you think that if boys can stay out till late, then why should not girls too do the same? The youth today thinks that since girls too are acquiring education, and earning money, so why should the they be denied all that which the boys enjoy. If that be the case, then the girls too should be given the same quantum of punishment as the boys. Then why now talk about girls and their future and marriages... all the offenders are treated alike by the law," said the inspector.

In the meantime, some TV channels seemed to have got wind of the happenings in the police station. They immediately dispatched a few cameramen to cover the news. The offenders and their parents were shocked on seeing the cameramen. Some of the girls immediately hid their faces. Bhavana looked around, dumb-struck. Rama became jittery and thought, 'Why doesn't this stupid girl cover her face?'

Earlier, whenever Rama used watch such news on the TV, she would say that the police should not allow the

offenders to cover their faces. The accused should be shamed publicly, so that everyone recognises them and then they will not dare to repeat the crime, at leastout of shame and fear of the society. Now she was agitated because her daughter was not covering her face. Rama felt ashamed of herself. She was extremely angry with Bhavana for having got them into this kind of an embarrassing situation.

Finally, with the intervention of the Commissioner, the offenders were let off with a warning. The parents had to give a written undertaking that would be responsible for any future legal issues. The licence of the pub was cancelled and a penalty was levied on the pub owner for breaking the law. The case was finally closed.

Prasad did not utter a word on the way back home. Rama opened her mouth to say something. Prasad gripped her hand to stop her saying anything. Bhavana felt that the silence in the car seemed to accentuate her crime. She slid down the seat and closed her eyes. Prasad realised that there was no point in saying anything to his daughter who was totally drunk. They reached home and disappeared into their respective rooms without exchanging a word.

The next day was Sunday. Bhavana got up at 11o'clock. Rama hurled a look of disgust at her daughter and turned away her face. Prasad lifted his from the newspaper he was reading and calmly addressed Bhavana, saying, "Have your bath and come. I want to talk to you."

Bhavana sullenly looked at her father, picked up her coffee cup and walked into her room. After she came back from her room, her father began talking to her in a serious

voice. "Look Bhavana, I think it's time you moved out of this house. You better rent out an apartment and go and stay there."

Bhavana had expected anger, warnings and sermons from her father. She was taken aback when none of these came from him and instead when he started talking as a matter of fact.

Prasad continued, "You can enjoy unlimited freedom if you are on your own. You will not be answerable to anyone. We have educated you. You are earning enough to keep yourself in comfort. I am not denying that it is my responsibility of getting you married. But that was the norm in olden days when the girls lacked financial independence. Then it was the bound on duty of parents to get their daughter married and ensure her future. I am not trying to escape from this duty. We have tried any number of times to find a suitable groom, but you always insisted that you would marry someone you like. You are twenty-five years old. You feel that you have the right to live your life on your terms. But we as parents feel that if you want to live with us here in this house then you need to adhere to some rules. We feel that you are abusing the freedom that we have given you. We have always believed that there should be no discrimination between the boys and girls and that girls should be provided with equal educational opportunities, and encouraged to achieve economic independence. All these talk of equal opportunities is to ensure that girls become self-sufficient, create an identity for themselves and become confident enough to face any kind untoward or unforeseen situation in life. Freedom does not mean boozing, going to pubs, partying and philandering endlessly. We have had endless arguments on this issue. But you have been doing what you want to do."

"Oh! You don't me to go anywhere, that is I should not

go out with my friends. You wanted me to acquire education. So I should study. You want me to have economic independence, so I should go out and work and come and sit at home quietly. Girls should earn money, but they should not have any fun, should avoid talking to boys, and despite being educated and earning, we girls should marry the groom you choose for us. And if we disagree with the parents, we are seen as brazen and rebellious," retorted Bhavana, seething with anger.

"Bhavana! We have had this argument many times. A home or a family thrives on certain rules and conditions. There are certain rules to be followed when you are living in a family and if one starts flouting them...." Bhavana interrupted her father and demanded, "Are these rules meant only for girls. Will you stop your son like you are trying to do to me?"

"Yes. Definitely. I will surely expect my son to follow the norms of the family. I certainly will not keep silent even if it is a boy, if he stays away from home till past midnight, whiling away his time drinking and dancing in the pubs. There is a limit to everything. Nobody stops you from going out with your friends, catching up on movies or dining out over a week-end. But children should be home by 8 in the night. You cannot understand what parents go through when children don't come home even by midnight. Especially when girls stay away late."

"There! Again! Girls, Bah!!" flared Bhavana.

"Yes. Especially girls. It is the girls who have be extra cautious. It was so earlier. It continues to be the same to this day as society has not changed much. Oh! By the way, I forgot

to tell you that your yesterday's achievements have found their way into today's newspapers. Please take a look at the news and the photographs. Do you expect us to allow you to do as you please, even after reading this? Can we ignore these reports and remain silent? Then we shall be failing in our duty as parents. It is our responsibility to guide you on the right path."

Bhavana was about to say something when her father stopped her saying "No! There is nothing left to discuss about this issue. I cannot continue arguing with you and spoil my health. Your mother is equally worried about your behaviour. She cannot sleep till you come home. Her health is taking a beating due to worry. She is constantly under stress, because she is unable to make you see sense. She is worried about your future. She worries that if she keeps me informed my health will suffer, due which she tries to hide sometimes and she tells me some things because she has to keep me informed. This constant stress is taking its toll on her."

"But why should you people worry? I can take care of myself. There is no need to worry about me. I am not a kid that I need to be protected."

"Precisely! We worry because you are not a kid. Today's incident should be good enough to make you realise that till you are married it is the parents who are held responsible for everything that concerns a child. Why do you think the cops called the parents before booking a case? All those people who read about this incident in today's newspaper will directly or indirectly hold us responsible for your behaviour. That is how an institution called family functions in our society."

"So you are trying to say that my lifestyle, while staying with you is making you answerable to your so calledsociety and their

meaningless norms. OK! Fine! You want me to leave this house. I will go and stay on my own," shouted Bhavana and started to walk off in anger when her father stopped her saying, "Wait! I am not done. You will be known as my daughter if you stay on your own. Till you get married your behaviour will be seen as a reflection of my upbringing. You can live life on your terms after you are married. The sooner that day comes, the better for all of us."

"First you want me out of this house. Next you want me to get out of your lives. Thanks Dad! You are probably the only father on this planet who has asked his daughter to leave the house in this manner," said Bhavana, seething with anger.

"I only wish that you had realised that it is you who is responsible for this situation," replied Prasad.

Rama who was anxiously watching all this blurted, "Prasad, what are you talking? How can you ask her to leave and where will she go? Either she stays with us or once she is married, she will stay with her husband. How can she go and stay somewhere else and that too in this same city?"

"Rama! Stop being so naive. You belong to the old generation. Girls of this generation are financially independent, self-confident and bold. They are capable of leading their lives on their own terms. Your daughter is drawing a salary of 25,000 rupees per month. Let her stay where ever she wants, and as she desires. She will have some peace of mind and so will we," concluded Prasad in a tone that showed that he meant every word he had said.

Bhavana realised that her father meant every word he had uttered. She was taken aback by his firmness. Taking care of home, cooking, cleaning washing clothes, rent, expenditure and all other

chores associated with living on one's own flashed across her mind. Here mom was taking care of everything. Getting her clothes washed, ironed, and stacked in her wardrobe, cleaning her room, regularly changing the furnishings, providing timely snacks and meals... "Oh God! Now I have to take care of all these things. Can I manage a home while simultaneously working? If I shell out ten thousand rupees per month towards rent, will I be left with enough money to afford that I am used to?" All these and more such disturbing thoughts started weighing in her mind. Prasad saw that she was terribly worried. Yet he pretended as if he was unaware of her disturbed state of mind. He threw the newspaper on the chair and walked into his room. Rama looked at her daughter's face and quietly walked away.

A week passed by. Prasad had noticed that Bhavana had not moved out of the house that entire week. "Bhavana doesn't seem to be going out anywhere today," he said to his wife.

"Yes. She hasn't uttered a word in the past one week. I think your words seem to have had quite an effect on her or maybe it is the fear of the police."

At the breakfast table, Prasad broached up the issue of Bhavana moving out of the house. He asked his daughter, "Have you made any progress in your house hunt? A number of apartments have come in the vicinity of your office. Did you try finding some flat there?"

Bhavana had thought that her father had asked her to move out of the house in a bout of anger and by now would have forgotten about it. But when he brought up the same issue again, she was taken aback.

"After you finalise your accommodation, you can take whatever furniture you want from here. Your bed, cupboard and since we have few extra sofas, you can take them too. You can take our old gas stove and as many utensils as you need from our kitchen. All the household paraphernalia that you will need you take from here. Just as parents give all those which a newly wedded daughter needs for her new home, we will give right way, and not wait till you get married."

Bhavana glared at her father. Her ego made her say, "Thanks! If I am capable of finding accommodation, and staying on my own, then I think I can take care of the furniture and such stuff."

Prasad continued in a condescending tone, "The house owners generally take a couple of month's rent as advance. Let me know if you need any money. It is better that you fix up a place by first of the coming month, so that we can pay the advance money too."

Bhavana realised that she had no way to wriggle out. Her father had made up his mind and she had to abide by his decision. With a pale face she walked away from the table.

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The next day Bhavana asked her colleague, "Aparna, I need a little help. Can I stay with you in your apartment for a few days?"

Aparna was surprised. "What happened? Why do you want to stay with me?"

"You are aware of that incident that happened on the Valentine's day. My parents have asked me to stay on my

own, on my terms. They said 'You cannot stay with us and behave as you please.' They have asked me to leave the house. You tell me, why should I stay with them? Don't I have something called pride? So, can I move in with you till I find a place to stay."

"Bhavana ! Tell me, which parent will keep quiet if the child fools around and comes home past midnight? Your parents have probably indulged you more since you are their only child. Leaving home and staying on one's own is not a child's play. I don't think you will be able to stay in my home. You are used to all comforts. Since I have seen your home and your lifestyle, I am able to tell you all this. I live in a single bedroom house. I don't think you can adjust in my home. I think it's high time you realised that your parents are your well-wishers."

"Aparna, how can I continue to stay with them after I have been asked outright to leave," said Bhavana angrily.

"They have said this because they could find no other way to make you see sense. You are blessed to have the support of your parents. But unfortunately you are unable to count your blessings. My father is no more. My mother has no alternative but to depend on my elder brother, who thinks she is a drain on his resources. I alone know what it means to live without any family support. That way you are extremely lucky. You are blessed with doting parents. You have seen how they struggled to get you out the police station. Just where do you think you would have been today if not for their concern? Who do you think would have come to your rescue? Parents not only have responsibilities, but they also are entitled to some rights. If you deny them their rights, then should they take your responsibility? That's precisely why they

have asked you move out andlive on our own terms. I think it's high time you realised your mistakes and mend your ways. Apologise to your parents and promise to turn a new leaf," advised Aparna.

"Oh! You mean to say that I must promise my parents to give up on having some fun and outings with my friends? They cannot go on controlling and monitoring my life just because they are my parents. I am an adult and I don't think I have to dance to their tunes."

"You have misunderstood your parents. They have provided for your education, supported your decision to work. They allowed you to enjoy life and have fun. They have not denied you anything. All that they want is you to do is not go overboard and damage your reputation and jeopardise your future. You are aware of the saying that 'when wealth is lost, nothing is lost. When health is lost, something is lost. When character is lost, everything is lost.'

Bhavana was livid with anger. "Is visiting pubs a crime?" she asked.

"Look Bhavana, our society has not become that westernised so as to ignore girls going to the pubs, getting drunk and dancing obscenely with the boys. Such girls become the talk of the town," said Aparna trying to drive home her point.

Bhavana did not know what to say. She asked, "So you think I will not be able to adjust in your house?"

"Despite all advice, if you still think that you want to come and stay with me you have keep in mind that my house lacks all

those comforts that you are used to. Anyway you are welcome to come and take a look and decide for yourself."

Bhavana went to Aparna's house. She found that her friend lived in a small room, which housed a cot, a table and a cupboard full of books. Clothes were piled up in the kitchen, which also had a kerosene stove, a kitchen platform filled with utensils. She peeped into a small wash room and immediately remembered her home. Clean, neat, spacious, with gleaming tiles and washbasin in her room. "Can she stay here? Impossible" she told herself.

"Would you like to stay here?" asked Aparna.

Bhavana swallowed hard. "I don't think it will be comfortable for two persons. I will have to look for another place."

"Bhavana. You are used to a high flying lifestyle. Your take home salary is 25,000 rupees. If you pay a rent of 10,000 rupees, then you will have to manage conveyance, provisions, bills, unexpected exigencies and not to forget your outings and fun with friends. Do you think your salary will pay for all these needs of yours? All along your parents took care of all your needs and that helped you indulge yourself. Do you think you can continue to lead the same kind of life? Why are you hell bent on making your life difficult? Look my situation. After the demise of father, my mother could not lend any kind of financial support. I send home some money to my mother. I amrepaying the loan I availed for my studies. I am plagued with these problems. Don't you think that you are blessed to have everything in life. The sooner you realise that your parents are your well-wishers, the better for you," said Aparna.

"Thanks for your advice. Bye," said Bhavana and walked out. Her mind was in a tumult. She was totally confused.

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That night, Rama came into her daughter's room and said, "Bhavana, tomorrow is the first day of the month. Your father wants to know if you have finalised some accommodation for yourself."

"Just what is his problem? You think I am an idiot who will leave if he asks me to leave. Did I ask you people to birth to me? Did you seek my permission to give birth to me and rear me, that if you ask me to leave, I should leave or if asked to stay put, I should stay? I am his daughter. I have all rights as the daughter of this family. You people told me isn't it that it is the parents responsibility to get the daughter married. And accordingly, till I get married, nobody in this house has the right to ask me leave this house. You can't just wash your hands off me," shouted Bhavana.

"Oh! You are talking of your rights. Yes!You will, because you are a literate person," retorted Rama.

"Yes! I am aware of my rights. A girl moves out of her parent's home only after she gets married and I shall not leave till then," asserted Bhavana.

Rama retorted, "Then get married as soon as possible and leave."

"It is your responsibility to get me married. Then I will leave. All along I said that I will find a groom for myself.

Now I take back my words. Find a suitable match and get me married," screamed Bhavana.

The mother was glad that her daughter had finally realised her mistake. The daughter failed in finding the groom for herself, and she realised that if throws the responsibility of finding the right groom on her parents, she can escape from the present problem. She was also sure that her parents will definitely bring a suitable boy for her. Each was happy with the outcome of this argument.

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Every story has an ending. At this moment, mother and daughter were feeling relieved, but it did not strike the mother that her daughter's past might become an impediment to her daughter's future. The daughter failed to understand that any man, however modern in his outlook, would still be traditional, when it comes to marriage. So the future remains a question. One has to wait for an answer. Till then this story will be "to be continued."

*(*Sashesham - *Andhra Bhoomi (Weekly) 8-8-2013)*

4. Good Old Days

It was on a Sunday evening. It was around four in theevening. Shruti was nagging her mother to take her out since she was feeling bored at home. Keertana tried to divert her daughter's attention by telling her, "Look! I will show you something that is more interesting than a movie." She switched on her laptop and kept it in front of Shruti. Shruti was lying on her stomach, with her chin cupped in her hands and watching with wide eyes the scenes that were playing out in front of her. "Mummy, look! The mother is bird feeding the small birds. See how the small birds are opening their mouths." Shruti was watching the video of a mother bird hovering over her nestlings and feeding the hungry and raucous baby birds.

"You must say 'baby birds', not small birds," said Keertana, laughing at the name her daughter had given to the nestlings.

"Ok. I thought since the bird is small, I should say small bird," justified Shruti, pushing away strands of hair that had fallen across her eyes.

"Mummy, look at this nest. These baby birds so cute," shouted Shruti excitedly.

"Yes, it is a crow's nest," said Keertana.

"Mummy, what are these?" asked Shruti, pointing towards squirrels.

"Oh! These are called squirrels," answered Keertana. The squirrels were hopping from one branch of a chikoo tree to the other. They held ripe fruit between their front feet and started nibbling. "Mummy, they are eating just like we eat, see," said Shruti. Keertana was watching her daughter enjoy the videos and recalled her childhood days when they would place a trap in between the branches of the chikoo tree, play with the trapped squirrels and watch them run out when released from captivity. 'Will this generation ever get to watch these kinds of things in the real world?' thought Keertana.

"Mummy, Bring me a squirrel. I want to play with it," asked Shruti.

"No! We should not trap them. It is a sin," Keertana tried to pacify her by telling the story of Ramadas trapping parrots. Shruti looked unhappy.

"Mummy, see this parrot is eating a guava with its red beak," Another scene! Another excited shriek! Keertana recalled her childhood days when in the morning she would pick up the fruits eaten and discarded by the parrots, wipe them with her frock and happily bite into them. So many memories!

"Look! How the calf is drinking milk from its mother! Oh no! The calf is pushing its mother. Will the mother not get hurt?" asked a concerned Shruti.

"Mother's don't get hurt, dear. Do you know that you used to kick me when I was carrying you," laughed Keertana. "Did I hurt you, Mummy? Did it pain a lot? I am sorry," said Shruti apologetically. "No not all! Everyone does that. It does hurt. Mothers don't get hurt. Infact they feel happy," clarified Keertana. Shruti turned her attention towards the laptop. The calf had its fill and it was gaily running around. Another scene: a mother cat was lying down and her litter were rolling over her, fighting and playing amongst them.

"Mummy! These kittens are so cute," Shruti said, stretching her arm towards the laptop.

A garden full of marigolds in full bloom, colourful butterflies flitting from one flower to the other... another place...another bloom of chrysanthemums....

"Did you have such a beautiful garden in your home," asked Shruti, trying to touch the flowers she saw on the screen of the laptop. "The garden in the front of the house was full of plants that bore different kinds of flowers. The back yard housed trees like, mango, jackfruit, chikoo, guava- so many different types of plants and trees in my grandmother's home. We as kids, would spend all our holidays climbing and playing in the midst of the trees. We used to play various games," said Keertana, fondly recalling her childhood. Shruti looked at her mother and asked, "Why is no body coming to my grandmother's house for the holidays?"

"Nobody is here to come for the holidays. My sister and brother are in America. Since they stay so far they cannot come every year during their holidays. Even if they come now, there is no garden in grandmother's house. They sold

their house and shifted to an apartment. They have grown old, you see. They cannot take care of big houses now. My grandmother had five children. So all our uncles, aunts, their children used to come home during their holidays."

"How nice! So many people and you can play with all of them. You were so lucky. I don't have anyone to play with," Shruti sounded envious. "Why did grandmother sell her house? Where will the children play?" she questioned. "Why are we constructing apartments without any trees?" asked Shruti.

"We need homes for the growing population. So they have to build apartments. There is not enough space for people. So where can we plant trees?" answered Keertana.

"So where are the squirrels, parrots and other birds now? Where have they gone?"

"They have gone in search of places where there are trees. Otherwise they must have shifted to forests. Earlier we used to find sparrows building their homes in the shafts and roofs of our homes. Now they do not have such places to build their nests. So we no longer get to see them. They have probably become extinct."

"Mummy, shall we also shift to some village?" asked Shruti.

"We cannot move from here. Your school and my office are here. Villages do not have good schools and offices. But I will take you to a village during the holidays," answered Keertana, trying to buoy up her daughter's spirits.

"Promise?" Shruti held out her palm. "Promise," said Keertana, placing her palm in her daughter's hand.

Keertana felt that she had done a wonderful thing. She had taken Shruti with her during her last visit to her grandmother's home. It was then that she had videographed the entire home, garden, and the surroundings.She was not sure if the village would retain its pastoral character by the time her daughter grows up. Today's generation is not lucky enough to watch live the cows and calves, parrots, sparrows, squirrels, plants, trees, fields, water bodies and such other scenes. They can watch these things only on the screen.

"You seem to have gone crazy. You have spent the entire day photographing trees, birds, cats, cows, calves and buffaloes," remarked Keertana's grandmother. "Wait grandma. My daughter is sleeping. Now is the only free time that I have to photograph all these things so that when she grows up I can show her our village, ancestral home, gardens and orchids."

"So you seem to have no plans of visiting us again. Is that why you want to show her the photographs? Or maybe you think that we might not be alive by the time you come the next time," said Keertana's grandma, feeling hurt.

"I don't know when I will come next. Even if I come to India, I may not have the time to visit our village," Keertana replied.

"I cannot understand these professions which take you away from your people. Any way I am glad you atleast visited us now even if you came with the intention of videographing the village and showing it to your daughter when she is old enough to understand."

Shruti got up from her sleep with a smile on her face. Keertana's grandmother took her in her arms and kissed her.

"Your daughter has had a long nap. Milk and bathing help children grow strong. One should give a proper oil massage to the children, apply bathing powder and give a through bath with hot water. It will relieve them of all kinds of bodily aches and pains. They will feel light and will have sound sleep. This is how we raised our children. Now-a-days, children are bathed in a basin as if they are some vessel that has to be washed with soap and water," commented my grandmother.

'My grandmother is right' thought Keertana. Grandmother supervised while the maid Venkatamma gave an oil massage to my daughter. Then bathing powder was liberally applied to my daughter and she was bathed in two buckets of hot water. My daughter was not used to this kind of bathing. She started crying loudly. Keertana panicked and told her grandmother not to be so hard on her daughter. Grandmother laughed away her anxiety and assured that Shruti will be fine. The baby was wiped dried and held over fragrant incense smoke to help dry her scalp. Later she was powdered and clad in a light frock. Within a few minutes she was fast asleep. She slept for three hours at a stretch. When she got she looked so fresh and smelled fragrant. She hungrily guzzled a bottle of milk. On other days she would take an entire day to drink a bottle of milk. Infact, she had to force- fed. Keertana photographed her grandparents with her daughter seated in their laps.

"You are right grandma. Earlier my daughter had to be force fed. But today she drank the entire bottle of milk in one go," Keertana said, kissing her daughter who smelt so fragrant.

"Stay here for a week. I will make your daughter chubby," said Keertana's grandma. Keertana had intended to stay for two days, but ended up staying for five days.She took pictures of all her relatives who visited them during those five days.

Today Keertana recalled all those visits while showing the videos. That was my last visit to my grandmother's village. Grandfather passed away peacefully within a year and half after my last visit. Grandma followed him shortly. My maternal uncles came from the States, sold the house and land, distributed the money amongst themselves and went back. Only memories and photographs were all that were available.

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Shruti used to watch the CD whenever she was free. She always was eager to know more about her great grandmother's home.

"Mummy, why don't we all meet like you all did when you were young?Why can't we all meet during the holidays? We all can then go to grandmother's home"asked Shruti.

"It is very difficult for all of us to meet. My brother and sister are in America. They will have to spend a lot of money if they want to come to India. They may not be able to get leave from their office during their children's vacations."

"Why should they stay in America? They can come to India and stay here like us."

"They have good jobs. They earn a lot of money. They will not earn that much in India. That's why people do not prefer to come to India."

"Why did we come to India?"

"Our situation is different. I could not take care of you all by myself. We cannot find domestic help there. I got a good job here. So we came back."

"But Daddy was with us. You left Daddy and came here. Why didn't Daddy come with us?"Shrutirepeated a question that she had asked a couple of times in the past.

"He did not want to leave his job. That is why he did not come with us," Keertana answered and pointing out to another event on the laptop said, "This is your uncle's wedding. He is my brother Murali, who stays in Houston. He had come to India two years ago to get married. Look at Vanaja aunty. She is the bride. That is why she is wearing a lot of jewellery. Look at her waist-band. This is her arm-band... I too have these. My mother gifted me all these. I will give them to you when you get married..." Keertana tried to divert her daughter's attention from talking about her father. Seven year Shruti quickly forgot what she was talking and got absorbed in watching the wedding photos.

It has been two years since Keertana came to India. Shruti has learnt a lot of things in the past two years. She is growing up. She has made friends in school. She loves to watch TV serials. She has learnt Telugu from Venkatamma, the cook and Seethalu, the domestic help. One day she came from school and said, "All my friends' have mummies and daddies and they all live together. I am the only one without a Daddy. Ask Daddy to come here and stay with us." "He will not come. And I have told you this many times," said Keertana, getting irritated with her sulking daughter. "So let us go and stay with Daddy."

"That is not possible. You are a kid. You will not understand now even if I tell you."

"I know everything. You are speaking lies. You and Daddy have got divorced. Isn't it?"

"My friends told me. They said that your Mummy and Daddy must be divorced and that is why your mother and you stay all alone. Did your father come even once to meet you all? Did he talk to you atleast once? This is what my friends asked me. Why are you hiding all this from me?" confronted Shruti.

'This generation is very smart. Since they are exposed to a lot of things at a very 'early age, they learn things very quickly. It is better to explain everything to them' thought Keertana. "You are a big girl now. You said that you know everything. Yes, your Daddy and I are divorced. That is why he does not stay with us or visit us."

"Why did you divorce him?"

"We could not get along. Why should we continue to live together if we are always fighting with each other?"

"So Daddy shouted and beat you?"

"There is no point in living together if we cannot get along and are always fighting and nagging each other," Keertana replied, a bit harshly.

"Nagging means... like you are always telling me not to watch TV for very long, or asking me to drink milk, shouting at me for leaving the shoes on the floor, telling me brush my teeth properly or shampoo my hair. You are always nagging me for each and everything. So will you someday leave me

and go away?" asked Shruti,looking straight into her mother's eyes. Keertana was shocked. "Or should I leave home? When you were small and my granny and grandpa must have shouted at you. Did you get angry with them and leave their home?" questioned Shruti. Keertana was dumb-struck. Shruti who was hardly seven years old was asking questions for which her mother had no answers. Keertana got angry. She shouted, "You are talking rubbish. You are a little girl and you must behave like one. You will not understand even if I tell you."

"No! Tell me in such a way so that I can understand," Shruti back answered.

"Look! The relationship between parents and children is not like the relationship between a wife and husband."

"How can it be different? You always put up with me. You do not get angry when your parents shout at you. Then you should have behaved the same way with Daddy too.Why did you take divorce?" Keertana looked helpless. She did not know how to make Shruti understand her problem.

"Say 'sorry' to Daddy and ask him to come. He will come."

"Shruti, please try to understand. Your Daddy has remarried. He will never come back," answered Keertana in a detached tone.

Shruti was shocked. She glared at her mother and walked away angrily into her room.

It was the day of Rakshabandhan. Shruti was watching TV. Almost all channels were showing programmes of sisters tying Rakhi's on the wrists of their brothers. "OK! Daddy will not come back. I am the only child. I want a brother.

Bring me a brother. I can play with him. I will tie rakhi on his wrist. We both can play a lot of games together. I don't have anybody to play with. I am feeling bored. You had your brothers to play with when you were a kid. Don't I need a brother?" Shruti frankly asked her mother.

"How can I get you a brother? A brother is not a toy to be bought," answered Keertana, laughing at her daughter's desire.

"My brother can come from your tummy. I saw it on TV. Children come from mother's tummies." Keertana was at a loss for words.

"Babies do not come out just like that from mummy's stomach. Babies cannot be born without daddies." Shruti did not understand what her mother was saying, but she quickly found an answer and said, "OK! Bring another daddy..."'

'Oh1! Very good! Another daddy can be my husband, but he cannot be your daddy,' said Keertana to herself.

"Shruti! Stop it now. This is something that cannot happen. So there is no need to discuss about it now."

"You should have had a baby when you and daddy were staying together. By now the baby would have grown up. Why did n't you have a baby then? All the others have two or three children."

"Working women find it is very difficult to take care of one child. They have to do office work and also look after the baby. It is not easy to do both the things. In earlier days, women stayed at home. So they could take care of more than one child," Keertana offered an explanation.

"You should have stopped working," said Shruti, sounding as if her mother was at fault.

'Yes. Where would I have landed up if she had given up her job and continued living with her cranky husband and given birth to another child. She negated her self-respect and lived with her husband for six years. She could not conceive for two years. All along she kept hoping that he would change. It took sometime to settle down in life. She conceived a year after settling down. Childbirth, taking care of the baby, household chores and lack of cooperation from husband made life impossible. It was time to report back to work. She had to leave her child in the crèche, go to work and pick her up after office. It was never ending work. To make matters worse her husband was always irritated and complaining. It was impossible to please him. He would nag and constantly find fault. She became sick and tired of her life. Finally, when she had run out of patience, she took her four-year old daughter and came back to India.She could succeed in her keeping herself going because of her parents who stood by her as she went through the divorce and tried to bring normalcy in her life.She took sometime to adjust to the new job and city. She had brought Seethalu, a domestic help from her village to help take care of Shruti. Though she is a single parent, she had been leading a fairly peaceful life for the past two years. But now Shruti was growing up and observing children around her and had started asking questions for which Keertana was unable to answer convincingly. Keertana knew that Shruti was bound to ask about her father some day or the other, but for Keertana that day came sooner than expected. Keertana was at her wits end.

Shruti became moody. She would hardly talk to her mother. She stopped playing with her toys. She would go to school, come back, complete her home-work and go back to watching TV. If she got bored with TV, then she would repeatedly watch the CD that her mother had shown her. She had stopped telling her mother about the happenings in her school or discussing whatever she saw on the TV. She would silently glare at her mother if ever she was asked why she was moody. One day Keertana got very annoyed and harshly asked, "Why are you behaving like this?" "How should I be? I don't have one to play with. I don't have anyone to talk to. You go to office in the morning and come back at night. By then I become sleepy. What will talk to Seethalu or to the cook? I cannot play all the games by myself," burst out Shruti.

Shruti was right. The children in their residential complex were either very young, or were college goers. And then there were office goers and three fourth of the residents were retired people.

"You can go to our neighbour, Sweety didi." Sweety was a student of engineering and she used to talk to Shruti whenever she could.

"She is always in front of the computer or on the phone. What will I do there?"

"So what am I supposed to do? Everyone is busy these days. Each one of us has to learn to keep oneself engaged," said Keertana, while asking herself if she had committed any mistake in showing her the CD.

* * *

"Shruti, do you want a brother or sister to play with?" Keertana asked one day after she was back from work. Shruti who was still sulking, suddenly brightened up and excitedly placed her palm on her mother's stomach and asked, "Is a baby coming to our house?" Keertana laughed and reiterated, "Tell me, do you want a sister or brother?"

"I don't want a sister. I want a brother so that I can tie a rakhi on his wrist. When will my brother come?"

"He will come. Babies take some time to come."

"Promise?" asked Shruti. "Promise," replied Keertana, placing her hand in her daughter's hand. "Now you should be happy.You should look after your brother. You should play with him. When I am away at office, you should take care of him with the help of Seethalu."

"Yes. I will. I will take care of him. I will feed him. I will give all my toys. I will tie a rakhi on his wrist," said Shruti gleefully. After watching Shruti's happiness, Keertana felt that she had taken the right decision.

* * *

Six months later... on a Sunday morning, Keertana brought home a three-year boy. On seeing the boy, Shruti exclaimed, "He is not a small baby. He is a big boy. Í thought you will carry a small baby in your arms."

"A small baby cannot play with you immediately. That is why I brought a big baby. He will call you 'didi' right now. He will start playing with you. Come here, come," Keertana took the boy's hand and placed it in Shruti's hand. The child was looking with wide eyes at the new faces and surroundings.

"Mummy, he is so cute. But he is so thin. Look at his hair! It is so long!" said Shruti, barely able to keep her happiness under control.

"He will become plump if we take good care of him. OK! Now why don't you suggest a good name for him," said Keertana.

"He is like baby Krishna. Shall we name him 'Vamsi'?"asked Shruti. "That's a nice name. We shall name him 'Vamsi.' "Come and give him a hug and talk to him," said Keertana. Shruti took him into her arms and, "Vamsi, call me 'didi'." She became engrossed with the child. Keertana heaved a sigh of relief on watching the happiness on Shruti's face.

'I am sorry Shruti. Forgive me for not being able to give you trees, plants, orchids, fields, cows and calves, birds, squirrels, bird eaten fruits... cousins to play with. This is all I can give you. And please forgive me for not giving you the kind of childhood I was blessed with.'

*(*Aapatha Madhuram - *Navya, APRIL, 28, 2010)*

5. The Parallel Lines

"Hai!" said a voice over the phone. That is a voicethat I can recognise anytime.

"Pavani!" That was all that I could blurt out.

"Thank God! You recognised me. I thought that I will have to introduce myself." I heard Pavani laugh.

"Where are you calling from? When did you come to India? Where are you staying? Are you here in this city?" I bombarded her with questions, feeling overwhelmed with myriad emotions.

"I will answer all your questions. But first tell me your address. Give the directions to the driver. I will be there in an hour's time. We will have lunch together. We will catch up while eating. If you cannot be bothered with cooking, then we can go to some restaurant. No, no we cannot go to the restaurant. Shravani will not allow us to sit in peace. We will meet at your place. I want a simple home cooked meal, with some pickles and curds. Nothing elaborate," Pavani said and handed over the phone to the driver to take down the directions to my place. I gave the directions and land marks to the driver and rushed into the kitchen.I had already made

the curries. She loves boiled and fried potato curry. I dropped a few potatoes in the pressure cooker and started chopping onions. A variety of pickles are sitting pretty on my dining table. Only a dessert is missing. I thought, 'shall I make some sweet?' But this is only an informal lunch. So I said to myself, 'Forget it. It doesn't matter.' I will formally invite her and make an elaborate fare. I finished making her favourite curry and went to freshen up. I washed my face and wore an ironed saree. While I was picking up the papers and books that were lying scattered in the drawing room, she rushed in and hugged me tightly. "Aunty!" she said and I could notice tears in her eyes. She slowly let go of me and said, "Sorry! Very sorry! I did not know till Padma aunty told me about your husband. I was told that he suddenly passed away.How are you managing, all alone?One gets used to living alone. There is nothing we can do about it. Either of the partners has to be left behind." She asked questions and she supplied the answers herself, while expressing her concern and sympathy.

"It's OK. I am getting used to living alone. We are basically survivors," I said, smiling at her.

"You are right. One has to be strong. We should learn to develop detachment," she said, patting my shoulder and escorting me to the sofa. That's when I saw Shravani, Pavani's two- year old daughter sitting on the sofa and staring at both of us, surprise written large on her face. She was very cute. She was dressed in a short jeans skirt and a white coloured blouse. She looked a baby model that one sees in advertisements. "Your daughter is so sweet, just like you," I said taking her into my arms. Shravani held out her arms towards her mother, since she was not comfortable in the

arms of a stranger. Pavani held her daughter and said in a comforting tone, "It's OK honey! Aunty is my best friend."

"Where were you? Where did you disappear all these days? Couldn't you atleast give a call? I was so worried about you. I asked your aunt a couple of times, but she never gave a proper reply. Maybe she didn't know or was not willing to tell! Any way they hardly stay in India. I had no news of you. I was anxious about you and angry too." I gave vent to my anger and concern. Pavani made her daughter sit on the carpet, took out a couple of toys from a bag and left the child to play with her toys. "What is there to say? The last four years have been very hard on me. It has been like a long nightmare. Oh God! This tension! Life has been difficult. Getting married was the biggest blunder of my life. I don't know what made me decide to marry at the age of 35 and there has not been a single moment that I did not curse myself for having pushed myself into this quicksand. I told myself that you deserve whatever you are suffering now.I took this decision in some weak moment of my life, because I felt that instead of plodding alone it is better to have someone to share your life's journey. I had hoped that life would become meaningful. The desire for marriage and a partner turned out to be a curse. I think I deserve all this," she said, her voice trailing off.

"Pavani! Stop crying! You are a brave girl and you are crying? Look everybody has ups and downs in life. Life cannot always go on as per our wishes. Unexpected twists and turns are not confined to stories alone but you will find them in life too. Today's girls are strong enough to face all the challenges that life throws at them. Tell me what happened? The last that I heard of you was that you had got married," I said, trying to console her.

"Yes! And that was the last happy day of my life and there is nothing interesting to tell," she replied, sounding defeated.

"What is the problem? One can try and help to find a way out, only if you talk about it."

"Who should I tell to? Mother and father passed away within a gap of three years. Both my brothers are so busy with their lives that they do not have the time or the desire to bother about me."

"You forgot me! The least that I could have done is to listen to you and share your pain," I said sounding hurt.

"Aunty, there are some issues that cannot be expressed. It might look trivial to the person who listens to these problems. The person who is suffering knows what he or she is going through..."

"OK! Get up. Let's have lunch. Would you like to give something to your daughter?" "No! I fed her before coming here. She has already gone to sleep," said Pavani, pointing to her daughter who was fast asleep on the sofa.

Pavani carried her daughter into the bedroom and put her on the bed. We both had our lunch and then lied down on the bed for a while. We got up, had some tea and in the four hours that she spent with me she narrated her life of past four years. Her voice echoed pain, helplessness, anger and despair as she spoke.

"I was happy that you had got married. I thought that finally you had decided to get married. Better late than never! I was glad that you had found a life partner. But I am sorry to

know that your marriage has not given you the happiness that it should have and on the contrary has made you desolate," I said. "I told you that I deserve this pain for taking this mindless decision. Mother was always worried that I was not married and she passed away with that pain. I gave my word to mother that I would get married. I felt that I have lived life on my terms for 35 years. I wanted a change for better in my life. And I took a wrong step. Well! I didn't know that it was wrong step then!"

"But you said that he was known to you since he was your colleague. Could you not guess anything about his character, his personality, his strengths and weakness? How is that you failed to interpret his behaviour?"

"Aunty, everyone puts their best foot forward till they are married. Al long as you are a girlfriend, you are perfect, flawless. Once you are married, then the mask slips and true colours are revealed. Men think that their wives are chattel and that they are entitled to say whatever they feel like saying. They forget the fact that a wife is also is human being and she has her own likes and dislikes, and an identity. I think women in the past must have suffered silently since they did not have financial independence, but to expect the modern woman to endure...how is it possible aunty?"

"We old timers feel that you should learn to adjust, but I know how much of a sacrifice in terms of killing our self-respect and negating one's self is involved in this process. But now you had a child too. Children need both the parents. In future she might accuse you of denying the presence of her father. You need the help and support to raise your child. From what you have told me, I gather that your husband is

dominating, egoistic and money-minded. Otherwise he does not seem to be too bad a person either. I think you can adjust to some extent. May be you should give your marriage another chance. Think over. You can lay down certain conditions which may help you stay with him."

"Aunty, can a marriage succeed when it bound by conditions and agreements. Marriage calls for understanding and affection between the partners. If these things are lacking, then the very foundation of the institution of marriage is on shaky grounds. How can we live together when we have placed restrictions and conditions over each other? Did I marry so late in life only to be trapped in a loveless marriage?" she said, sounding hurt at my advice.

"Pavani, men and women expect different things from each. It is very rarely that you find some couple who are blessed enough to complement each other.One is left two options when there is a lack of understanding or a complete breakdown of communication. Either the couple part from each other or travel in the path of the other."

"Yes! It is always the wife who has to walk in the footsteps of her husband. It is the bounden duty of the wife to compromise, isn't it aunty?" said Pavani.

"Today's girls are proving that it is not always necessary for the wife to compromise. But in the process they are creating more problems for themselves. Of course, even today there are people who are willing to compromise because they feel that they cannot live alone."

"Aunty, I am unable to decide anything. I have travelled so far to find some peace. I came to you because I am sure

that you will be able to guide me. After my parents passed away I did not come for I felt that I had nothing left here. Of course my brother invited me, but this is not an issue that I can discuss with everyone. Even if I talk to him, I know that he will ask me to adjust. But I trust you to show me the right way. Please guide me."

"You said that you asked him to leave the house... Where is he staying now? Is he creating any trouble?"

"He is staying with some friend of his. He came to his senses only after he left home. He is sending his friends to broker peace between him and me. His friends are carrying messages on his behalf because they are feeling bad for whatever has happened. They are trying to tell me that misunderstandings between spouses are very common and such issues do not call for living separately. They claim that they are my well-wishers, so they want to see me and my husband together. The whole thing has started to irritate me, so I have come to India, looking for some peace. Please tell me, how do I go about solving this problem? I thought that I will take some kind of decision only after meeting you," she said looking at me hopefully.

"Pavani, did you ever try to bring about a change in him? Did you talk to him about this? If you had been a little flexible, maybe he too would have been soft towards you. Since you stood your ground, he might have become more adamant."

"Aunty, I have tolerated everything for two years. He was fine for a couple of months after marriage. Then he started revealing his true colours. He started bickering over money matters, constantly finding faults, nit-picking, always

wanting to have his way. It was always 'my way or high way'. He felt that he was always right, and that I was an ignorant fool. If I retorted, then I was labelled arrogant. If I did not answer, then I was unconcerned and unfeeling. If I bought something, then I am a spendthrift. I am arrogant because I am financially independent. Despite being a woman, I do not know cooking. Why do you have move so closely with men? I am not like other women.He lacks humanism.He does not possess the qualities of a refined person. His behaviour is cheap and he is greedy. He wants me hand over my entire salary to him. He shows no concern even when I am unwell. He has no love towards his wife. And that is the root cause of all troubles.I have adjusted myself with such a person for two years," she said, in a tearful voice.

Pavani had always been very independent and decisive. She had always taken the consequences of her decisions in her stride. It was pathetic to see such a bold and clear headed person reduced to confused and helpless soul. She always did what she thought was right, irrespective of what others might say or think. But marriage had knocked away all her independence, confidence and level headed approach. What kind of advice can one give to such a person? Is it fair to ask her to adjust and continue to live with her egoistic, uncaring husband? But will she be able to give, single-handedly, a proper upbringing that her daughter needs? Can she go in for a second marriage? Is it all that easy to remarry? Will her second husband be generous enough to accept Shravani as his own daughter? Will she again get trapped in another unhappy marriage? I felt that Pavani had two options. She either straight away files for legal separation or for the sake

of her daughter and to avoid becoming a single parent, she should compromise and continue with certain conditions laid down and agreed upon by her husband. What do I tell her? She had great faith in my decision making abilities and respect for me. What do I tell a person who has reposed so much faith in me that she thinks that I can find a way out for her?

I am old enough to be her mother. But surprisingly we have developed a close relationship. I first saw Pavani when she was in her twelfth standard. Her family had bought the flat next to mine and moved in. Very soon, an intimacy developed between our families. We started exchanging dishes, together going to the market, playing cards on holidays, children coming home to borrow books from me, Pavani's mother complaining that her daughter was not heeding her advice and I trying to talk both into amicably resolving the problems. Pavani completed her plus two and got into the engineering stream. Later she wanted to go to the States for further studies. Her parents wanted her get married and then pursue her dreams. Pavani was not unwilling to contemplate marriage. Her mother went on an indefinite hunger strike. I had to intervene and convince the parents saying that if they stood their ground, then Pavani might take some drastic step. I told that since they are the parents and obviously older and more experienced than their daughter, they ought to be more flexible and give in to her wishes. I managed to convince them and Pavani went to procure the visa. Each time she came during the holidays, her parents would bring up the topic of marriage and start nagging her. Pavani andher parents would argue over the marriage proposals because they felt that she was being too difficult to

please. Pavani's father suffered a heart attack and passed away. Mother was heart-broken to see the daughter unwilling to settle down. She finally managed to convince Pavani to get married. The ten years that they stayed as my neighbours erased the age gap between us and we became very good friends. Pavani used to confide in me and always ask for advice and counsel. The last I heard of Pavani was that she had got married. Then she did not keep in touch me for about three to four years. Finally, now she was here. What do I tell her? I was in deep dilemma.

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A monthlater, I received a long email from Pavani-

'I have killed my feelings, lowered my identity into a coffin, cremated my self-respect, performed the last rites of my personality and compromised this soul-less self with reality. I have followed the advice of my well-wishers and signed and got signed an agreement which will keep me in this marriage. I have marked my boundaries with conditions laid down in the agreement. Our hearts are divorced, but we shall live together. We will continue to live under one roof. I will cook, serve and hand over half my salary- He will provide for the family. He will stay away from my path, just as I will. The child belongs to both of us. Time will decide who and how much of love should be dole out to the child. May be the child will grow and take stock of the quantity of love she received from her parents!

Aunty, everything has a saturation point. We have reached that point. I want peace- I no longer have the patience to struggle or fight for anything. All I desire is to spend time

with my daughter, take good care of her and be an integral part of her life. I don't want arguments, fights or disagreements. I have no desire of climbing up the professional ladder (I feel like quitting the job. But if I am financially dependent, then I have to beg for every rupee from him and the very thought of doing so keeps me from giving up my job. I have decided to fulfil my part of the daily routine and spend the rest of the time with my daughter. You were right when you said that it is better to live with a husband, (whatever kind of a person he may be. We all need some human company), instead of living all alone. I have decided that I shall go through this whole thing because my daughter needs her father. Parallel lines never meet. Yet the train journeys on tracks that will never meet. Life too shall journey forward. I hand over half my salary and the rest half I happily spend for my daughter and myself. My well-wishers are happy with arrangement. I hope you too are happy with this agreement.

Yours,

Pavani.

I sat down quietly, swirling in an ocean of emotions, ranging from happiness, pain, sadness and sympathy. I felt sorry for Pavani. Pavani would have gone through tremendous mental turmoil to arrive at such a decision.

But parallel tracks also meet at some point. If a train has to journey further, the tracks have to meet somewhere and part at some point. If we live like parallel tracks, meeting and parting and the process continuing, may be at some point in time, the anger, resentment and differences between the partners will hopefully wear out. The hearts may not beat in

unison, but with the passage of time, the partners may get used to adjusting and life may go on. Man lives on hope. Hope keeps us going. And I hope that the turmoil in Pavani's life will subside and sometime in future she will live in contentment, if not in spectacular happiness.

*(*Samanthara Rekhalu -*Vanitha, Deepavali Special Edition, October, 2006)*

6. A Story That Went Awry

Shakuntala looked at Raja Rao who had just come back work and had sullenly thrown himself on the sofa. While handing over a glass of coffee she asked her husband, "Are you unwell? You look tired."

"I am fine," he answered briefly answered and took the coffee glass from his wife.

Shakuntala was not convinced. She placed her palm on his forehead and said, "There is no fever. Is your head aching? Shall I fetch you a pill?"

"I said I am fine. I don't need anything," answered Raja Rao in an irritated tone.

Raja Rao had a shower and came and sat in the drawing room. Shakuntala could see that he seemed preoccupied with something. She knew that he would lose his cool if she again asked him anything. She decided to wait till he himself was willing to talk.

He continued to look lost even at the dinner table. She could no longer hold herself back and angrily said, "When I asked you as to why you are not your usual self, you said that everything is fine. If everything is fine, then why are you

looking so upset and lost? If you don't want to talk about, then let me know so that I will not ask again."

Raja Rao said, "Today morning I saw Geetha while I was on my way to office."

Shakuntala was shocked. But she quickly gathered herself and teasingly exclaimed, "Is it so? Your mood is off for such a simple thing! One should feel happy on seeing one's ex-lover."

"That's precisely why I did not want to tell you. Everything seems very funny to you," he said, glaring at her.

"No. I am not joking. So what if you happen to see her? Did she see you? Did she talk to you? How is she? What did she say? Did she atleast recognise you?" Shakuntala bombarded her husband with a volley of questions.

"She saw me and promptly brought her car to a screeching halt right beside my scooter and started talking to me," said Raja Rao, feeling a wee bit proud and emotional.

"There is nothing wrong in talking to an old friend if you happen to meet somewhere by chance."

"Yes, there is nothing wrong talking. But she insisted on my accompanying her to her house. Despite my telling her that I will come some other time, she dragged me to her place. She handed over my scooter to the driver and she drove me to her home."

"So you didn't go to office today. Did you spend the entire day at her place?" asked Shakuntala in a disconcerted voice.

"Yes. She had her way. She took me home and forced me to call up the office and inform them that I would be on leave today. Then she insisted that I should have lunch with her. Her husband is away at Delhi on some official work. She refused to let me go before evening and said that we can sit and talk. She asked the cook to make a lavish lunch for both of us. From morning to evening she narrated all the happenings of all these years."

Oh! Wow! It appears as if your day was made. You had an elaborate lunch and spent an entire day chatting with your close friend. What else can anyone wish for? After having a wonderful day you should be on cloud nine. .But why are you looking so upset?" Shakuntala asked in a tone that betrayed some sarcasm and jealousy.

"What is there to chat? She did all the talking. Throughout the day she kept blowing her trumpet.Shespoke of her life in America, her husband having a cushy job in the States, his heavy pay packet, a four bedroomed house, a swimming pool, two expensive cars, two wonderful kids who are child prodigies, their curricular and extracurricular achievements, and finally how her husband felt that now was the time to demonstrate his patriotism and so they relocated to India and now he the Vice-President of some company here. She told me about the handsome salary that her husband draws and the various perks that the company gives him. Now they have a palatial home in Jubilee Hills. She showed me around her house, the furniture, and the garden with its bonsai plants which are her hobby. She told me about her membership in various clubs, and her acquaintance with many VIP's... her nonstop talk drove me mad."

"All that is fine! But I want to know why you are looking so distraught"?

Raja Rao did not reply immediately. He sat with his eyes down cast. He raised his head after a while and said, "It was a sense of déjà-vu. The same feeling- feeling like an insect, a worm in her company. Life was going on smoothly and her coming back is not pleasant incident. This accidental meeting with her has brought back the old memories and raked up the past. It is like throwing a stone in placid waters. It is very disturbing," he replied very sincerely.

"Are you saying that you still harbour a soft corner for her?"

"No, no! You are mistaken," he replied feeling flustered.

"Then why are you so unnerved. You met an old friend, had lunch together and spent some time catching up. That's all. Would you have reacted in the same way if you had met some other old friend? Why are you givingso much importance to this meeting?"

"I don't know. You are aware of her smooth talking, her ability to attract people towards her, her cunningness, her ingenuity. I feel that she was showering too much attention on me. I am worried. I am not comfortable with her coming back after such a long time. I feel she will try to disturb the peace in my life. She may try to get into my thoughts without my consent and much to my dilike"he muttered.

"Stop feeling so important. Don't harbour such thoughts that she is still craving for you. And please remember that you are not a young man. You are in your fifties. She has grown up children. She is leading a luxurious life. Her husband

is highly placed and earning in lakhs. So don't be under the impression that she would be interested in someone as ordinary as you. Young men are susceptible to infatuation in their college days. Being immature they think that this attraction is love and they turn into love lorn 'devadas'. I think you should stop thinking that you are a youngster," replied Shakuntala, in a reprimanding tone.

Shakuntala was confident that Raja Rao being a balanced person who would not get easily swayed by any temptations. He was aware of the fact that his wife trusted him completely. He was also aware of Geetha's nature. But Raja Rao was not very sure whether he can remain immune to Geetha's charms. He did not know how to convey his doubts to his wife.

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"Hai! What are you doing? You never called after our last meeting," said Geetha, in a sulking tone. Raja Rao felt uncomfortable.

"Oh hello! There is nothing much to talk. So..." muttered Raja Rao.

"If there is nothing to talk, should we stop talking? Do we need something to talk about?" she asked, teasingly.

Raja Rao did not reply.

"OK. There is not much to tell you over the phone. Come home and I will tell you a lot of things," said Geetha, naughtily.

"Hello! Why are you quite? My husband has gone to Delhi. I am feeling bored. So why don't you come over? We can spend some time together. Shall I send the car? Will you come?"

'She thinks that I will go running the moment she calls. I should give her company whenever her husband is not in town' thought Raja Rao angrily.

"Sorry, I cannot come during office hours. I will come on some holiday," he curtly replied and disconnected the call.

She called again. "Why did you abruptly disconnect even as I was talking. Well, if you cannot come during office hours, then do come in the evening. I will be waiting for you. Do not disappoint me. See you in the evening," she said and immediately disconnected even before he could reply.

Raja Rao's ego was hurt. 'She thinks I am still that teenaged Raja Rao was smitten by her charms. She is sadly mistaken if she thinks that I am at her beck and call. No force on this earth can make me go to her house,' thought Raja Rao.

He reached home and told his wife about Geetha's phone call and invitation. He wanted his wife's opinion. He did not feel like hiding anything from his wife. Shakuntala is a very mature person. It was due to Shakuntala's healing touch that he was able to recover quickly from the damage that Geetha had inflicted on him. Shakuntala's maturity was like a soothing balm to the wounded feelings of Raja Rao.

"How could you refuse when she had invited you with so much love? You should have accepted her invitation," teased Shakuntala.

Raja Rao glared at her. "You find it very funny. You would have sulked if I had really gone to her place."

"I will not sulk. Please go," said Shakuntala, pulling his leg.

"Stop pulling my leg." Raja Rao snapped at his wife.

"Why do you think Geetha is trying to get friendly with me again? What do you think her intentions are? Why this sudden interest in me after such a long time...,"?

"She is not interested in your friendship. She just needs an audience to listen to while she boasts about herself and her family. She is trying to see if men are still interested in her. She is only playing a mind game, just for the heck of it," said Shakuntala derisively.

"Do you think she would do such a thing at this age?"

"That is her nature. We all know that she always wants the entire world to revolve around her. She married for money. All her materialistic needs have been fulfilled. There is no longer any propensity to consume. Her children are grown up. Her husband is busy with his work. She needs something to keep her occupied. She sees that need being fulfilled through you. She is trying to find if you still are in love with her and how exactly you have been without her. She is trying to see if you will succumb to her charms like you did in your college days. I feel that if you give in to her invites she will use you to fill the time she has on her hands. She also seems to be eager to known about your marital life..."

"That's precisely why I don't feel like going to her place,"

"Do not refuse the next time she calls you. Do go and try to assess for yourself. Try to portray a calm, contented and peaceful life. Let her know that you are very happy with whatever life has given you. Try to convey to her that whatever love you had for her during the college days was nothing but a passing phase which most youngsters go through.Then watch her reaction," advised Shakuntala.

"We both can visit her place on some Sunday. She will realise the truth when she sees us both together. If she yearning for friendship then we can meet her occasionally," said Raja Rao.

"No. I will not come. You go alone. If you find that she wants to be friends, then I will accompany you. If it is something other than casual friendship, then I am out," said Shakuntala.

Raja Rao looked at her feeling uncomfortable. "You are feeling so uncomfortable as if she is literally throwing herself at you. In fact, you should be happy because that is what you men desire," teased Shakuntala.

Raja Rao looked at her angrily.

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"You said that you would come but you didn't. I kept waiting for you for a very long time. I felt so disappointed. The least that you could have done is to call and tell me that you won't be able to make it," said Geetha over the phone, sounding very glum and disappointed.

Raja Rao lied to Geetha. "It was not possible. I had guests at home."

"Will you come today?" asked Geetha hopefully. "Tomorrow evening my husband will be back. We cannot talk freely in his presence."

"I am not sure if I can come. If I am able to finish my official work then maybe I can make it," said Raja Rao in a detached tone.

"Raja Why are you talking in such a tone? I get a feeling that you are trying to avoid me. Why are you behaving in such a manner?" she asked sounding very hurt.

Raja Rao could not detest from saying, "Don't you know why?" His voice sounded harsh.

"You haven't forgotten the past. We were young and immature then. In our youth we do so many things that we feel are right. Do we have to take all those things so seriously," said Geetha.

"I don't want to rake up the past. That is why I do not want to come," Raja Rao answered very curtly.

There was a minute's silence from her side. "I felt happy when I saw you after such a long time. I invited you because we are college mates," answered Geetha.

"I neither have the time nor the desire to meet you. My life is going on very smoothly. I do want not to rock my life. Sorry," he said and disconnected the call. He mentally patted himself for having mustered courage to give her a piece of his mind.

'She will not come back after what she has received from me,' thought Raja Rao, feeling very relieved.

Three days later, on a lazy Sunday evening, Raja Rao was sitting and sipping coffee. He heard a car coming to halt in front of his home. A few seconds later he heard the gate being opened and to his surprise he saw Geetha standing at the threshold.

Raja Rao did not feel like extending a warm welcome to her and escorting her to the sofa. He did not feel like extending any kind of hospitality.

"Oh! It's you? Come," he said while barely getting up from his chair. He showed her another chair. He looked towards the kitchen and called out to his wife, "Shaku, look who has come."

"Excuse me!" he said before disappearing inside to wear a kurta.

Shakuntala came out from the kitchen and was surprised to see Geetha. Raja Rao came out and sat down. Geetha was apprising Shakuntala from head to toe. "Your husband is refusing to come to my home. If the Mohamed does not go to the mountain, then the mountain goes to Mohamed," said Geetha naughtily while looking at Raja Rao.On finding that there was no response from either Raja Rao or his wife, Geetha continued, "It appears that Mohamed finds no reason to visit or is no longer interested in the mountain."

"What would you like to have? Tea or coffee?" asked Raja Rao.

"You don't have to be so formal with me," said Geetha.

"Now you are rich person. How can I be informal with you," answered Raja Rao.

"Your expression tells me that you are not happy with my coming here."

"Yes. I am wondering what has brought you to this poor man's hut"?

Shakuntala excused herself saying, "I will bring coffee for you,"

Geetha did not want to let go of these few minutes of privacy with Raja Rao. "Why are you being so cold and

distant? Friendship does not differentiate between poor and rich," she said.

"You are right. Friendship does not discriminate between rich and poor. But when it comes to marrying, then these things matter a lot," he said angrily.

Geetha was taken aback with this unexpected onslaught. She gathered herself and said, "Yes, these things matter a lot when it comes to marrying. We have to consider the status, property, education, family, job and such other things before tying the knot," she answered as if she was unaware of what Raja Rao was hinting at.

"You are still angry with me, right?" she asked teasingly.

"Angry! Why should I be angry with you? I am leading a contented life. I have a loving wife, brilliant kids, a home to live, a steady job... what else does anyone want? I am happy. The biggest blessing in my life has been marrying Shakuntala. She is a personification of what is meant by the term, 'better-half'.. She is my greatest strength and asset," he said sincerely. He also wanted to convey that there no regret or pain for not having got married to Geetha.

Geetha's face turned ashen. She laughed and said, "Not bad. You are all praise for your wife. I wonder how much more you would have praised if only you had married a more beautiful or rich woman," she said in a low voice that betrayed a tinge of jealousy.

Even as Raja Rao was about to retort, Shakuntala came with coffee cups. Geetha cleverly changed the topic and said, "Shakuntala, your husband is all praise for you. He says he is blessed to have a wife like you."

"When we do not get what we desire, then one must learn to be happy with what one gets. There is no point in yearning for what we don't have and being happy with what we have is the trait of all intelligent people. My husband is intelligent and mature enough to understand this," said Shakuntala.

"Are you both praising each other just to make me feel jealous?" asked Geetha gaily.

"If you are at stage where you are feeling jealous of us, then we can only pity you," answered Shakuntala.

Geetha's face turned red. "You are intelligent. Nobody can win an argument with you," said Geetha sounding a wee harsh.

Raja Rao sat watching the two women talk. He seemed to be enjoying the whole conversation.

"Every human being is good at something. May be this is my plus point," said Shakuntala.

"Geetha, in the past twenty-five years I have understood that peace is the most important thing in life. One can love waterfalls. One can admire it for a few hours, maybe for even for a few days. But nobody would like to live for a life time with the sound and fury of the waterfalls. One will certainly flee to a place where there is a peaceful stream flowing. Everybody wants peace in their lives. Physical beauty cannot keep you enamoured all the time. Beauty is skin deep and transient. It is the inner beauty that provides tranquillity and stability. I have found the peace I was looking for. I am happy with what I have. I have no regrets in life," said Raja Rao. Geetha's face turned pale.

Shakuntala asked naughtily, "Are you saying that I am a quiet stream and she is a waterfall?"

Geetha looked livid. But she immediately retorted and said, "It is the case of sour grapes and it is not easy to confess to that."

"Everyone is free to interpret it the way it suits them. I have no problem. I am happy with the way my life had taken shape," said Raja Rao.

Shakuntala laughingly answered, "You will be enraging Geetha by repeatedly saying that you are happy with your life. Geetha might be pushed to saying as they say in TV serials that 'I will not allow you to live in peace. No one shall have what I could not have.'

"You both are ingenious. You are trying hard to show that you are 'made for each other' and that you are leading a blissful life. You are sadly mistaken if you think I will be fooled and start feeling jealous. I came to visit you because I happen to know you. I feel pity for both of you. I have everything that anyone would desire in their life. I am blessed with money, property, homes, wonderful kids and a loving husband who thinks the world of me," said Geetha with pride and arrogance.

Raja Rao looked at his wife and remarked, "Poor Geetha! She is still under the impression that I am that Raja Rao whom she knew in the college days."

Skahuntala smiled knowingly. Geetha was enraged.

"I pity you Raja Rao. I am reminded of a proverb, 'empty vessels make noise.' You both are making so much noise,

trying to convince me that all is fine with you all. I pity your efforts," she said smilingly though one could not escape the anger in her voice.

"What a strange coincidence! I am reminded of the saying, 'A leopard will never change its spots.' A person can change their habits, but not their nature," said Raja Rao.

Geetha rose angrily from the chair and before storming out said, "I made a mistake by coming to this kind of a place."

"You are right! People like you do not deserve to come to a place like this," Raja Rao added from behind.

Raja Rao was freed from the accumulated anger and humiliation of twenty-five years. He felt light and free.

*(*Cherigina Katha - *Patrika, 2nd Anniversary Special Issue, October 2003)*

7. The Other Side

"You are incapable of loving. Just get lost," chided Kaveri. She did not stop at that. "You don't even the spelling of romance, so how can I expect you to know the meaning of that word," she added sarcastically. She further continued angrily "I sometimes get a doubt about your virility." She knows a lot about my virility. She has experienced it before marriage and during the past six months of our marriage. I do not have the patience to reply to such meaningless talk. Kaveri turned livid when she saw no reaction from her husband, despite hitting where it hurts the most. She picked up from where she had stopped. "There is no need for me to live with a man who knows nothing about love and romance." She walked out of the bedroom, pushed open the doors of the other bedroom and angrily closed the doors behind her. This is not the first time that such a scene has played out in our house!

I was thankful for this opportunity to have a peaceful night's sleep. I switched off the lights, turned on the bed light and the moment my head touched the pillow, I started falling asleep. I don't have the patience to go and kiss and make-up with my wife. I will address her anger tomorrow morning.

The husband leaves at eight in the morning and comes back around nine or half past nine in the night. Throughout the day he is busy with projects, meetings, discussions, presentations, working on the system and later travels for one and half hours to wade through the bumper to bumper traffic to reach home. Doesn't she knowthat such a person gets more tired than the labourer who has carried basketful of gravel throughout the day? A labourer's work is labour intensive. His body alone gets exhausted. But for an executive like me work involves physical and mental stress. At the end of each working day, I feel like as if I been through a sugarcane crusher and end up like sugarcane sans the juice. Don't these know this? It is excusable if an uneducated housewife cannot understand the rigours the job involves. But doesn't she understand? If I say this, she retorts saying that 'you had all the time in the world to run around me before marriage. Before marriage, you always used to look for an opportunity to romance behind trees or in closed cars. That's it. The moment a girlfriend becomes a wife, the chase is over. You got the game and now you are complacent.' This tired body clamours for rest. It just waits to hit the pillow. Who can even think of romance and sweet nothings? Times have changed now. It is not a secure and cushy government job, where I leave at ten in the morning and am back by five in the evening, and then relax in my armchair, devouring the plate of piping hot pakodas that the wife so lovingly hands out. Does my job provide the luxury of sitting and chatting with my wife every evening and later catching a first show or going out for a stroll? My job does give me time for to visit friends or entertain them at home, even on weekends. Two week-ends in a month, I am travelling on official work. Some

unexpected work crops up on most Sundays. Jobs in the private and software sector do not have fixed working hours. These are target-oriented jobs.

Nobody is interested in knowing how much of effort you have put in. All they consider is the end result. We have to generate business, make profits, and achieve targets. They pay you well, but extract work from you. Why do you think they pay half a lakh to a fresh graduate? Are the employers on a charity mission? Why do they spend so much on your flight tickest and such other perks, if not to squeeze the life out of you and use you to generate higher profits? Why doesn't an educated person like Kaveri understand this? If you are lucky you might get some Sunday all for yourself. But the body craves for rest and not outings. One feels like having a sumptuous meal and sound sleep on such rare Sundays. And there will be personal works that need to be attended to. One can imagine the situation if one has children too!

Kaveri wants to start a family. She is thirty and feels that her biological clock is ticking away. She is right. But staring a family is not like switching on the rice cooker and within a short time the rice is cooked or like switching on the TV and having the programme playing out on the screen. It is not like preparing instant coffee. I never objected when she said 'I bored of my job. I want to quit.' On the contrary I was supportive and said, "It is up to you," though it meant a loss of twenty-five thousand per month because that was her take home salary.

These women always magnify the faults of their men. To add fuel to fire, these women writers too write reams on the problems faced by women. They probably think that men

do not have problems. It is only the women who are facing the problems, all created by men. They look at the problems from a women's point of view, but never from a man's.

A man has to bend backwards to woo his girl and is it fair to expect him to continue to do so even after marriage? This is life and not a movie where in one scene you are in Switzerland, romancing your girlfriend and in the next scene you are running around the trees, singing duets on the beach? I will not deny the fact that, while I was dating her, I did everything possible to impress her. I took her to restaurants, movies, parks-now is it possible to continue with these outings, given my hectic schedule? Can I ignore my professional commitments and devote all my time to her? How did I find time when I was courting her? Well! Young men have to make all kinds of compromises and sacrifices to find time when they are dating. They have to work over time to make for the time spent with the girlfriend. Sometimes they have to beg a friend to help them out in their work. Else, they are willing to face the boss' fury. If they continue to behave like they did when they were bachelors, and end up losing their jobs, then won't they be accused of being irresponsible and immature? These are the issues which women do not understand. All that they do is find faults. Kaveri used to make great efforts to attract his attention. She would dress up, apply lipstick, wear different kinds of perfumes. She knew his fondness for sarees and she would drape herself in attractive sarees. But now? She spends the entire day dressed in that nightie which looks like a burqa, her face is also smeared with layers of creams, her hair caught up in a rubber band. Now she dresses up only when we have to go out. Otherwise she remains drab, since she probably

feels smug that she has hooked me and now he doesn't deserve anything more elaborate, as far dressing goes. On my birthdays, she would promptly wish me at the stroke of midnight, appear at my doorstep in the morning with a bouquet of flowers, feed me sweets, take me out for lunch and dinner, buy clothes and other gifts... now does she continue to do the same things? She used cook mouth-watering dishes and bring them over and feed me lovingly. Now, all that she does is cook some rice and lentils in the pressure cooker and keep it on the dining table. If I come home late, she has her dinner andsits watching the TV. She does not even bother to heat the food for me. Is he feeling hurt that she has become so complacent that she behaves as if she need bother with atleast serving the food? Women have kitchen gadgets like cookers, grinders, ovens which have made cooking easy and quick. They finish cooking in half an hour and behave as if they have been slogging away for hours together. Loading the machine machine also seems like drudgery. If they are working women, then they can be excused, but even those women who stay at home do not bother to lovingly serve food to the husband who has slogged all day.Hasn't she changed? It has become fashionable for wives to keep finding faults in their husbands.

She wants to have children. That's fine. But why can't she provide the right kind of ambience and mood? Instead of sulking, snapping, shouting, she can welcome with a smile when I come home and say, "You must be tired. I have got hot water running for you. Soak yourself in the bath tub." Can't she hand out my white kurta and pyjama, sit with me at the dining table and serve me piping hot, delicious food- then hand me a few betel leaves- light incense sticks in the bedroom, drape herself in a white saree, wear jasmines in her

hair'- Oh c'mon! You are getting too demanding now, is it what you are thinking? Are you saying that I am living in the era of black and white movies- You are right! Now we are living in hi-tech era. Nobody has that kind of time. Today people do not have the time to start a family because of professional commitments. All that we are doing today is enhancing our qualifications just to take home fatter salaries, climb up the professional ladder, and constantly watch out for better openings, and find ways to learn lakhs of rupees. Due to this obsession, we have forgotten the true meaning of relationship between spouses, and turned it into a mechanical one. We have forgotten how to savour finer feelings like romance, wooing and spending time together. We are constantly rushing around like programmed robots and all our energies are channelled towards earning more andmore money. We have no time to ponder over whether it is worth all the pressure, whether we are really able to enjoy the fruits of our hard work. We end up marrying because we feel that our tastes match, the attraction lasts for some time and life becomes routine and predictable. Earlier people did not have all these facilities that we are enjoying today. The man of the family used to be the sole bread winner of the family. Yet people were contented. The entire family used to go out movies or picnics, because they did not have this kind of pressure which saps you of all your human qualities. Festivals and other such occasions saw relatives visiting each other's homes, building relations and strengthening the bonds. Sadly, today's youth have turned into machines that are programmed to earn money. Their salaries buy them all the materialistic comforts, but unfortunately they are lacking in family ties and the love, affection, bonding and a sense of

security that only human relations can bestow... Disturbed sleep, disconcerting thoughts, 'go to sleep boy, tomorrow is another hectic day in office,' Harish tried to pat himself to sleep.

Harish got up in the morning to find his wife missing. She had left a note on the dining table, under the fruit bowl. The note tersely informed him that if he 'wanted his wife back, come and take her, with apologies. Time limit-within a month.' Look at her attitude! How arrogant! What crime did I commit that I have to go and apologise to her and bring her back? Fine... I will enjoy this freedom for the next twenty-nine days and then think about what to do on the 30th day. Her first husband must have got fed up of her arrogance and immature behaviour and must have divorced her for this reason. First husband! You must be wondering what is all this. Well! I haven't told you, right? Despite knowing that she was a divorcee, I married her in face of disapproval from my parents, who refused to attend this marriage. I am not saying that I done a great thing or made sacrifices, but if you feel that she has been ungrateful, then I am not to be faulted. She has set a time limit of one month. What will she do if I go after one month? Will she divorce me?

I can imagine the scene at her parental home. Her grandmother will ask her point blank, "Why have you come without prior intimation and that too unaccompanied by your husband?" "Oh! Do I need to inform you all before coming?" she will retort angrily and go upstairs to her room. If her parents ask her the same thing, she will reply in an irritated tone, "Don't I have the right to come here?" Let's see what reason she will give her parents about her leaving her home.

They might give me a call. I will wait and watch. I am sure they will try to make their daughter see some sense. They are bound to warn her to stop being childish, otherwise even this marriage will end up like the first one. They will surely warn her saying, "How many times will you marry and divorce? If you think that you can remarry the third time, then you are mistaken because you will not find anyone willing to marry you." Not that she is going to mend her ways. I will have to find a way out of this mess and the only way out is to give her a shock treatment. With these thoughts, Harish got ready and left for office.

* * *

My father-in-law called on the fourth night after Kaveri left home. I very happily chirped into the receiver, "Hello Sir! How are you?". He just muttered 'hello' and came directly to the point. "It's been three days since Kaveri came here." "Yes uncle," I replied innocently. "What is the matter?" he asked. "I don't know uncle. When I got up in the morning, all I found was a note on the dining table." "Oh! She came without telling. What happened?" "I don't know. Your daughter is with you. You should have asked her," I replied, feeling very smart. "She says she is just visiting us." "It's OK. If she feels like coming here, then she will come," I replied vey casually. Poor old man! He might be pulling his hair in exasperation, not knowing how to extract any information from his son-in-law. "So there is no problem between you both?" he asked. "As far as I am concerned, I cannot recall any problem from my side." There was silence for a few minutes from his side. "If there is no problem, why is she so moody ever since she came here. If we ask her anything, she

is getting irritated and snappy. How are we to know what the problem is if we are not told? How can matters be sorted out if both of you remain so rigid? We, elders will try to counsel if you people tell us everything. We will try to find a way out. It is not right to be so stubborn for small issues."

"That is something you should be telling your daughter," I answered very sweetly.

"I have told her and I am telling you too," he said and I could detect irritation in his voice.

"Listen sir! I have no complaints about her. I don't know if she has any against me. Good night," I said before disconnecting the call.

'The boy has not complained against her. The boy was his usual self...' My father-in-law would have reported to his family members. 'We know about our girl. She is high strung. It is either my or highway for her. How can we hold him responsible when the fault lies with our girl?' My in-laws must be agitatedly discussing this issue. They would have told their daughter about the phone and she would have gone off the handle shouting, "Who told you people to call him?"Let her offer whatever explanation she wants to. 'My husband has no idea about romance. He is not co-operating though I want to start a family.'Let her go ahead and blame me, but in these twenty days she will realise her faults.

* * *

The kind of relief that unexpected showers bring, especially after a long spell of dry weather and the happiness that a patient feels when after undergoing a slew of tests, his doctor declares him fit, was found on the faces of my in-

laws, when I visited them. My in-laws were fully aware of the fact that their daughter will not bend, whatever be the reason, and they could not find fault with me to accuse me of any wrong doing. They had come to their wits end not knowing how to resolve this stalemate. Under such circumstances, my arrival at their doorstep brought out the myriad forms of joy that they expressed through their words. Kaveri was dumb-struck. They all got up from the dining table and cordially invited me join them. "Hai Kaveri!," I said joyously. She turned pale. "You could have given us a call," said my father-in-law, barely able to conceal his relief. "Please come son!" said my mother-in-law,very graciously. "How are you son?" enquired Kaveri's grandmother. "What a pleasant surprise!" said my brother-in-law. "I am glad that you have come on a weekend. You can happily spend Saturday and Sunday with us," said my mother-in-law.

"What weekend? From today onwards every day is a Sunday- a jolly day," I said gaily. Everyone was taken aback. "What?" they all said in a chorus.

"I have resigned my job. I no longer wish to work for the corporate sector or IT sector. What is the point in earning money if one cannot enjoy the same? These jobs do not give us the time to enjoy the little things in life. I have realised that I have lost out a lot in life, chasing money. So I have put in the papers. So now I have decided to find a nine-to-five job-in some small company," I said very philosophically. They looked at each other, not knowing what was going on. Their faces expressed anxiety. Kaveri turned pale.

"Harish, don't you think you have been hasty in resigning a job that fetched you more than half a lakh?" asked my father-in-law, in an agitated tone.

"I don't know if I have been hasty or not. I do not have peace of mind due to work related pressure nor is my wife happy. Why should I slog day and night if the earnings cannot make us happy? These materialistic comforts are not giving any comfort to my wife. So why should I continue with something that has not given us any kind of contentment?"

"But we all need money to lead a decent and comfortable life. Life will become miserable without money. How can you give up a job that pays you handsome amount and settle for a job that will fetch you a meagre ten thousand rupees? It is utter foolishness on your part," said my father-in-law, in a partly angry and partly dissatisfied voice. Kaveri's face was changing colours like a chameleon.

"There is no limit to man's greed. A person who earns ten thousand wants to earn twenty, a person making fifty thousand wants to earn one lakh. Where do we draw the line? Your daughter is also educated. She too can earn some money. We want to live for ourselves. We need to give up some things to get somethings. Our youth will not come back ever. I don't want to turn into a money making robot. Excuse me... I have to freshen up and change my clothes. Where should I change my clothes?" "Kaveri, take your husband into your room," ordered my father-in-law. Kaveri escorted me to her room. As soon as I entered the room, Kaveri caught hold of my collar and hissed, "What is this drama?" "What drama? My God! Did you think that I was joking?" I said, releasing my collar from her grip and turning to my briefcase. I took out my resignation letter and the acceptance letter from the concerned authorities and showed it to her. She read the letters and turned livid with anger. "You, You! You did this just to

hit back at me. How did you think you could take care of your wife and home without a job?" "Don't worry dear! I will find some job somewhere. Anyway, why should I worry when I am blessed with an educated wife like you who can bring home the bread, butter and jam? May be you can take up a job and keep us both going." Kaveri was fuming with rage. She started showering punches on his chest. "You did this because I left home without informing you. All this to spite me, right?" she screamed. I dodged her and said, "Don't be sillyKaveri! You can't have the cake and eat it too." I said before going into the washroom. That night she pushed away my hand when I tried to hug her. I did not try again.

* * *

The weekend passed. Two days into the week, Kaveri found that I had settled down comfortably and showed no signs of moving out. She took out the clothes, crammed them into the suitcase and dragged me up by arm saying, "Get up! Let's go to our home." "Why? What is the hurry? I came to spend sometime here with all of you. Since I am jobless, there is no hurry. Let me enjoy my in-law's hospitality."

"No in-laws will respect a person who is jobless."

"I am anyway jobless. So why would I feel offended if they don't respect me?" Kaveri was fuming with helplessness.

I felt sorry for my in-laws. They couldn't say anything to the son-in-law for having quit his job. They were worried about their daughter's future. They were pained since they were aware that all this was the consequence of their daughter's attitude. They were under tremendous turmoil.

That evening we all gathered on the lawns to chat. My father-in-law casually started, "Today's generation seems to be a confused lot. It looks we, the older generation seem to have committed a mistake by educating boys and girls, without showing any kind of gender discrimination. Thanks to their education they should have become mature and balanced. On the contrary, they have become arrogant, egoistic and immature." Kaveri glared at her father. "Don't glare at me. You know that I am speaking the truth. Are we denying higher education to the girls? Are we not facilitating your professional growth? You girls can be independent and lead a happy life without anyone's support. But no! You need a man in your life. You can't bear to live alone. You want to marry a person of your choice. Then you don't want to adjust with your spouse. Your self-respect gets injured very easily. You cannot bear to hear 'no' in your life. Compromise is an alien subject to you. You do not have second thoughts about leaving your home if your husband differs with you. You feel insulted, belittled. Didn't we fight in this house? Didn't we shout at each other? Did we have difference of opinion, arguments, followed by sulking and not talking with each other? Every time we had a fight, did we leave the house in anger? When you can forgive and forget in your maternal home, why can't you do the same in your marital home? Can't you adjust with the man who you professed to love and then married him?" "Yes! It's only we women who have to adjust all the time," remarked Kaveri, her voice dripping with sarcasm. "It is not always about women adjusting. When it comes to making adjustments there is no gender bias. Sometimes the husband has to adjust and other times the wife. Otherwise the institution of marriage will collapse. You

might marry any number of times, but if there is lack of understanding and adjustment, then all the marriages are bound to fail." Kaveri walked off in a huff. My father-in-law held my hand and said, "She is a foolish person. Atleast, you please adjust with her." "Uncle, there is a limit to how much any one can adjust. She flares up for little things. She sulks if she cannot have her way. How can she always have her way?" "Yes Harish, we know that she is in the wrong. We cannot find fault with you. Whatever differences you both might have, you people have to sort it out between yourselves," said my mother-in-law, pleading with me. "Leave it to me, Uncle," I said. I could clearly see relief on their faces.

* * *

It was past ten days since we came back from my in-laws place. My wife had a first-hand experience of what it means to have a jobless stay-at-home husband."Don't you have any intentions of looking for a job? All you are doing is eating and sleeping," she asked.

"Let's see! I can look for a job later. Let me enjoy life now. Let me satisfy all your dreams of romance, togetherness and starting a family. Let me fulfil all these expectations of yours and then I will leisurely think of looking for a job," I replied. Kaveri flared up. "Don't be stupid! You want to start a family? And how do you think you are going to raise the kid with no job and no money?"

"Ok! Why don't you take up a job? I will stay at home and take care of all the household chores, cooking and reading books, watch TV and generally enjoy life. And I promise that I shall always feed you hot and tasty food. During the night,

I will make exquisite love to you and keep you satisfied," I said in a theatrical manner.

"Shut up! Remember that no woman respects a man who lives off his wife's earnings. I am not bothered what you will do, but please keep in mind that it is your duty to keep the home fires burning. I refuse to look for employment. It is your responsibility to earn," she said. "Yes, my dear, now you have come to my point. Yes, it is the responsibility of the man to take care of the wife. A man should work hard, earn a lot of money, provide all the materialistic comforts like home, car, TV's, fridges, ovens, washing machines, you name it and he has to buy it. Day and night he should work in the office and then come home and take the wife out for dinners, shopping and outings. Hedarenot forget birthdays, wedding anniversaries and such other days. He should buy gifts for all these occasions and demonstrate his love to the wife. He has to constantly woo her, romance her, surprise her and be at her beck and call. Have I forgotten anything from the list? Do you think a husband is a human being or a mule? And what is your job? You think it is out dated to hand out a hot cup of tea to the husband who has come home after a long day's work. You think that it was the job of the 'pati vrata's' of the by gone era to lovingly feed fresh and piping hot to the husband. And God forbid! If a tired husband loses his temper and says something in anger, then you shout from the roof top that your husband is harassing you. You drag him out and brand him as a demon or a psychopath. Do you ladies have unalienable rights over anger and insults. Is a man not expected to get angry, hurt or insulted? Is he expected to carry the cross all his life? When people stay together, there are bound to be

misunderstandings, arguments, difference of opinion. We can fight, shout and sulk and generally express our hurt or displeasure. But we should learn to adjust, apologise, forgive and forget. It is not the right thing to run off to maternal home at the drop of a hat. Please remember that no parent will eternally entertain such daughters. Just as there are no perfect men, there are no perfect women. If one is not willing to live a life of adjustment and compromise then one should live independently, with complete unfettered freedom, outside the institution of marriage. .Do you want to lead a life of absolute freedom or you wish to live within the boundaries that a marriage calls for, is something that you should decide for yourself. It is up to you. Think over it and let me know your decision," I said very seriously and walked off into the balcony with the newspaper in my hand.

Fifteen minutes later, Kaveri came to me, stood behind me, slipped her arms around my neck, lifted my face and kissed me on my forehead. "I know that you have not resigned your job," she whispered. "Oh my goodness!" I thought.

You have seen how selfish wives can be. All she is wants and is bothered about is the job and not the husband.

(Is it only women who have problems? Are men free from problems? Sometimes we have to think about the problems that half of humankind faces. Hence I changed the route and looked at marital life from a man's perspective)

*(*Rendo Vaipu - *Patrika, 2nd Anniversary Special Issue, November 2004)*

8. Lakshmana Rekha

A resounding slap landed across Kartika's face. Shelooked daggers drawn and her eyes flashed with anger as if to say "You hit me, how dare you?"

Savitri exploded at her daughter, Kartika, "Are you a kid? What is your qualification? What is your professional status?" "You are twenty-five years old, with a MS degree from the US and presently work for a reputed corporate house. Yet you are not worldly wise. I have repeatedly warned you not to loaf around with all kinds of unworthy characters. We gave you the freedom to choose your own life partner, In the name of friendship if you frequent clubs, pubs, go out for dinners and outings with all kinds of elements, you will find it extremely difficult to get married because no man will ever trust a girl who moves closely with boys. I also reiterated that these men will have a good time with you, but when comes to settling down they would find you simply unacceptable. But all my advice has fallen on deaf ears. Now you have personally experienced what I have all along been telling you. You thought that it was fashionable to wear skimpy clothes, and pillion ride on the flashy bikes of your boyfriends. After right royally ignoring my advice now you are asking me a way

out? You spent all your time in the company of cell-phones, computers, and iPads. Didn't you know the uses and abuses of these gadgets? Hugging each other, displaying affection in public and clicking such pictures with your cellphones and gloating over them. Now you have realized these very photos have turned into the sword of Damocles precariously hanging over your neck, waiting to destroy your life. Why do you have to seek advice now from your 'you stupid, idiotic mother' "It's my life and I will live on my terms" is what you always said. Now this is your problem and you go ahead and solve it your way" burst out Savitri, venting out her pent up anger.

"Alas! I do not know when girls will ever learn. They are acquiring degrees, but are not worldly wise. They read books, watch movies, access the internet, yet they remain foolish." Savitri's words faltered due to her anger. Kartika glared at her mother and walked away with a crest fallen expression her face.

It was after a long time of constant requests to marry and settle down, her daughter Kartika had finally said that she had found her 'Mr Right'. The boy who hailed from a decent family was highly qualified and well placed. Though the prospective groom belonged to different caste, Savitri and her husband Ashok had agreed to this match. The wedding date was just a fortnight away, when this crisis erupted. "What can be done to salvage this situation? How do I handle this person who is trying to dig up the past of my daughter and destroy her future? When will these girls ever realize the dangers? Is it the fault of their tender age or is it plain infatuation? Is it their weakness that they cannot escape from such distractions, falter and get trapped in situations of their

own making? Not all girls are like this, but some girls, due to their thoughtlessness or arrogance, like Kartika, flaunt their beauty and wealth and attempt to attract the attention of young men, fool around and generally behave in an unbecoming manner. Finally, they get caught in such dangerous situations and end up destroying their lives" thought Savitri. She had managed to vent her anger at her daughter, but could nothing to remove the gnawing fear in her heart. She flopped down feeling defeated and helpless.

"So, mother and daughter indulged in a verbal duel again. Angry words were hurled as missiles" said Ashok, observing the crackling tension between Savitri and Kartika. "I was under the impression that these wordy duels had their curtains down. Anyway what is the latest problem?" said Ashok trying to ease the situation at the dining table. The arguments, fights and misunderstandings between the mother and daughter had eased ever since Kartika's wedding had been fixed. It was as if they both had realized that they would miss each other after the wedding. But today things seem to have gone back to square one, thought Ashok trying to figure out the issue.

There was complete silence. Neither Savitri nor Kartika ventured to say anything. "Anything serious?" asked Ashok. "God forbid, but did Kartika say that in the past two months I have realized that Gautam no longer measures up to my expectations. Let us call off this wedding," he asked. Such thoughts were troubling Ashok and with mounting tension palpable in his voice he asked, "Savitri What happened?"

"Why are asking me? Ask your darling daughter," she snapped at her husband. "What happened Karti? Tell me, my child" Ashok tenderly asked his daughter.

"It is this same pampering that has brought her to this stage" shouted Savitri. Kartika flung her dinner plate and walked way angrily. "Will you atleast tell me what happened" asked Ashok with unconcealed irritation. "That boy, Dinesh, who used move closely with Kartika…" faltered Savitri. "Yes, yes. We thought that they would get married. But Kartika herself said that she did not want to marry him." added Ashok.

"Yes, that same fellow. Now he is resorting to blackmail. He said, 'You fooled around with me and had a good time'. Now he is threatening to stall her marriage by showing their intimate photos to her fiancé."

"But why is it so? They both had mutually decided not to get married to each other" asked Ashok with a pale face.

"It was not mutually decided. Kartika had refused to marry Dinesh. That boy tried to control her life by refraining her from interacting with all and sundry. And do you think she is the kind who will allow anyone to exercise control over her? She told him point blank that we cannot get along with each and we better stay away from each. He has been lying low all this while and now that he has come to know of her impending marriage, his ego has taken a beating. Now he is showing his true colours."

Oh God! What shall we do now? The wedding cards have already been dispatched. What if Gautam comes to know of this sordid happenings?"

"Ever since I heard of this problem from Kartika, I am trying to find a way out of this mess."

"Why don't we ask Kartika to confess to Gautam about all this even before that Dinesh does."

"That is what I too have been contemplating. Before that Dinesh complicates the matter and then later Kartika trying to salvage the situation by offering an explanation, it is better that she honestlyconfesses everything to Gautham whatever be his reaction. It is better to tell him everything now before marriage and face the outcome, instead of living in constant fear of what this Dinesh will tell Gautam. Why don't you convince her to do so? If I suggest the same, she will outright reject it" pleaded Savitri.

* * *

"Haritha, I am in trouble… I need your help."

"What is it? What happened?" asked Haritha anxiously.

"That rascal Dinesh. He is blackmailing me."

"Why and what does he want? You both split up four months ago and now you are going to marry Gautam. So what is the problem now?"

"Well! I had rejected him and now that I am going to get married to Gautam his ego has taken a beating and is now raving to hit back. The moment he came to know that I am getting married, he is showing his true colours. He has my pictures in his mobile phone and he is threatening to expose them to Dinesh".

"Actually it is all your fault. You are to be blamed. Despite telling you any number of times that Dinesh is a roadside Romeo and not trustworthy, you went ahead with what you with your friendship with him. I had warned you on

several occasions not to move closely with such a characterless person."

"Please Haritha. Don't get angry with me. Help me out. I was floored by his sweet talk. I fell for his charms, both literally and figuratively. That is the mistake I committed."

"Did you inform your parents. It is better to take them into confidence." Haritha suggested.

"Yes. I informed. And mother gave me a tight slap" said Kartika, sounding like a child.

"Really! Your mother slapped you? Well! You can imagine how furious she must have been that she went to the extent of slapping you. What did your father say?" asked Haritha.

"Mom and Dad discussed with each other and suggested that even before Dinesh approaches Gautam with the photos, I should voluntarily confess everything. They also said that otherwise after marriage, I will have to live every moment with killing tension that Dinesh might surface any day and spill the beans. My parents feel that if I tell Gautam about all this, he might actually appreciate my sincerity. And if he doesn't and decides to call off the marriage, I will have to abide by his decision. What do you say? What is your opinion?" said Kartika.

"But we cannot allow this criminal Dinesh to get away with his crime. Do you think any fellow who takes gullible girls for a jolly ride and dumps them like hot bricks, should let off the hook so easily?" asked Haritha, her mind working furiously.

"Please show me a way out. I don't want to lose Gautam" pleaded Kartika.

"OK. Since today is Sunday and you are free, come over my place. Two heads are better than one. We will find a way out. And now you relax" suggested Haritha.

* * *

"You. Why are you constantly sending SMS's to me? What do you want?" asked Kartika in an exasperated tone.

"I want you" answered Dinesh mischievously.

"Shut up! We parted ways five months ago. Now why are you chasing me," shouted Karitka.

"Distance makes the heart grow fonder, darling. I am unable to get over you," replied Dinesh.

"Look! Don't try to act smart. I know your true colours. Just stop this blackmailing business and tell me what do you want. You know that I fear none,"

"Oh really! What do I want? Well! I want you. Earlier you kept me waiting saying 'not now, after marriage.' Now you that you are getting married, it is the right time" said Dinesh suggestively.

"Shut up. Stop this deviant behaviour. "

"Stop being so arrogant. You have only two options. Either you satiate my desire or allow those photographs to reach one who should not be seeing them" said Dinesh laughing sadistically.

"Look, I want to talk to you. Why don't you come home?"

"Not home, my dear. I am ready meet at some hotel."

"I will not come to any hotel. Let us meet in Haritha's apartment. We will meet at eleven tomorrow after she leaves for her office. I will borrow the keys of her flat from her."

"But look! Don't try to act smart. If you try, remember that it is your life and reputation that is at stake. I have nothing to lose" warned Dinesh and disconnected the call.

Haritha and Kartika were left discussing this problem for a very time.

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"Oh good! You have come as come as promised. Thanks for still having a soft corner for me. Do you think we erred by splitting up?" asked Dinesh while walking nonchalantly into Haritha's apartment.

"Look, I haven't come to discuss the past with. Just tell me what is it that you want," said Kartika in an exasperated tone.

"I have already told you what I want of you. I want you, not forever because you are going to marry someone. So only once you will become mine. It is a very simple desire, don't you think so?"

"And if I say that it is not possible?" Kartika asked him point blank.

"Ok, tomorrow by this time along with your fiancé, the entire world will see the pictures of our intimate moments on the Facebook," said Dinesh arrogantly.

"Oh. You haven't yet posted them on the Facebook. It appears that I am faster than you. I have already posted them. Would you like to take a look?" said Kartika while taking out her ipad from her handbag. She opened the Facebook page and thrust it into Dinesh' face. "Read it, you are an English language expert, aren't you? Any way you need not take the

trouble of reading it. I will read it for you." "Please pay attention, she said looking at shell shocked face of Dinesh. She happily started reading out the message she had posted on the social media. She had posted that "the person in this photograph is Dinesh. He is a cheat. Girls beware! Do not trust him. He is a roadside Romeo who is adept at trapping innocent girls, and after having a gala time with them he dumps them unceremoniously. He does not stop at that. He uses the photographs to blackmail his former girlfriends. This is his favourite pastime. He is a sadist. I warn all the girls out there not to trust this fellow and fall into his trap. This is a fervent plea of a girl who has been a victim of his cruel machinations." Kartika completed reading and looked triumphantly d at Dinesh and said "the entire world will see this in a few minutes. You know what Facebook is all about, don't you?"

"You…Kartika" uttered Dinesh and sprang at her.

"Hey! You better stop there" shouted Haritha coming out of the bedroom. "Shut up and sit quietly. Even slight movement from you will force me to call the police," threatened Haritha while rudely pushing him on to the sofa. Dinesh looked at them pale faced.

"Dinesh, you are under the impression that you are very smart. We too are tech savvy and know how to handle cell phones, computers, iPads and such other gadgets. We are aware of internet and Facebook. We are not luddites. We know how to use social media. If you blackmail and threaten us, we are not going to suffer in silence. We are girls of this modern era. We both moved around as friends. We mutually decided to

part ways when we realized that we were not compatible. After all this while, has your ego took a beating because I chose to marry someone else? You thought that you could continue to blackmail me and that I had none to turn to for support. I have saved all your SMS'. I have also recorded all our conversations ever since you started blackmailing me. These are more than sufficient to lodge a complaint with the police. Tomorrow I will meet your boss, expose you and have you fired from your job. You don't take the trouble of telling anything to Gautam, because I will tell him everything even before you do. Just apologize for your criminal behavior and leave. If you think you can still continue with this harassment you are sadly mistaken, because now it is your life that is at stake," said Kartika.

"Dinesh, aren't ashamed of your behaviour. You are highly qualified, decently employed and enjoy a privileged place in the society. Yet you indulged in such a cheap and deplorable manner. You thought nothing of blackmailing a girl. Such cultureless behaviour" shouted Haritha, venting out all her contempt. "You seem to be living in that era where a boy could blackmail a girl by flaunting the letters that she had written. Don't underestimate the intelligence of modern girls. Now get lost. Do not ever show your face to us," she screamed while pushing him towards the main door. She snatched his mobile phone, deleted all the photographs, hurled the mobile and banged the door on his face.

"Don't waste any more time. It would be the best thing to let Gautam to know about this from you. Go and tell him everything," urged Haritha.

"If I tell him now… his reaction…" Kartika hesitated.

"Whatever be his reaction, you will have to face it. Go and confess everything, even if he calls off the wedding it's okay. This is the best way out of this problem instead of living in constant tension throughout your life." Haritha answered.

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Gautam patiently listened to Kartika and lightly brushed aside the issue saying "Kartika, ever since your mother came yesterday and told me everything, I have been hoping you would come and honestly tell me all that happened. Thanks, you did not let me down."

"My mother came told you all this." Kartika was surprised.

Gautam continued saying, "Yes. She said that due to your foolishness, inexperience and know-all attitude, you had got yourself into this mess. She said that she had suggested to you to tell me about this issue. She was worried whether you would follow her advice or ignore her, so she personally came to tell me everything. She said that any decision that I take after listening to her would be acceptable to your family. She does not want you to live a life of constant fear by concealing these facts from me. I was mighty impressed by her honesty and forthrightness. I only wanted you to come out sincerely before marriage. You have reposed my confidence in you. Thanks."

"I wanted to come yesterday and tell you everything. But before that Haritha and I decided to teach that rascal such a lesson that he would never ever dare to harass any girl

in future. Having told you everything now I am feeling relieved," Kartika said sitting down in a relaxed manner.

"Karitka, shall tell you something? Your mother is right. Modern girls are educated, but are not worldly-wise. They fall an easy prey to false talk of young men. With the evolution of technology in the form of cell phones and social media like Facebook one needs to be more careful. Financial independence is making modern girls arrogant and this is making them take wrong steps."

"Oh! Stop sermonizing. At home my mother and here now you have started the harangue. Don't underestimated the modern girls. We know how to handle these kind of problems" said Kartika proudly.

"Sermons are not time bound. They are time tested and time less. Nobody is trying to confine women to kitchen. But if anyone crosses the boundaries of decency then they are sure to land in trouble. Girls should learn to draw their boundaries," said Gautam.

"Your absolutely right, Gautam. My 'know all' attitude did not allow me to realize that what I doing was wrong. Your maturity has made me realize how lucky I am to be getting married to you," said Kartika sincerely.

(Lakshmana Rekha - *Andhra Bhoomi, Feb. 2012)*

9. The Camouflaged Truth

On a Sunday evening, at around five thirty, a wife expressed her desire to her better half. "I am feeling bored. Let's go out to watch a movie."

The husband who was solving the Sudoku puzzle raised his head which earlier buried in the day's newspaper and said, "You express a desire to watch a movie on a Sunday evening and that too at five o'clock. How do you think we can get tickets for the movie," and promptly went back to his favourite pass time.

"We can easily get the tickets. Where there is a will, there is way. Let us go to an old movie. There are hardly any takers for old movies. So getting tickets will not be a problem. Now get up and start getting dressed," ordered the wife.

"Should we spend money to watch those meaningless films, Anyway, at least four films are telecast by every channel. Are there any more movies leftto watch?" asked the husband.

"Why do you have to contradict everything I say? Nothing like watching a movie on the big screen. I hardly ever ask you anything. And once in a blue moon, when I request you for something, you have any number of excuses to avoid fulfilling my simple desires" complained the wife in a sulking tone.

The sulking wife is not a newly married woman. She is 58 years old spouse of a 63-year-old superannuated employee, who loves to spend his time solving Sudoku puzzles. The wife's name is Rajeshwari.

"Do we have two hundred rupees to watch those barely clad characters perform obscene dances to cacophony that passes of as music?" asked an irritated Kesavamurthy, alias Murthy.

"Such semi-nude women are a feast for the eyes of all men," darted the angry wife.

"All those indulgences are a passing phase of the youth. It has been quite a few years since youth and I parted ways. I would be utterly grateful if you leave me alone and have one of our neighbour accompany you," said Murthy in an impatient voice.

"Anyway it is not entirely your fault. You are only a party to the crime these newspaper fellows are committing by printing these kind of useless puzzles. And you think that filling those boxes with numbers is the be-all and end-all of your existence. Now will get ready or not? Stop arguing and get ready quickly, otherwise I will go and watch the movie all by myself," warned the highly incensed wife.

"Thank God! You have your declared your independence and by default you have granted me my much desired freedom. Now stick to your stand and go ahead with your plans and enjoy yourself to the hilt. By the time you come back from your outing, I will have the rice cooker on, so that you will be treated to piping hot food ," said Murthy in a tone of mighty relief.

"Oh! Please don't take the trouble of switching on the rice cooker. Your delicate finger would be hurt. You sit and continue with what gives you salvation, your Sudoku! A husband who cannot fulfil a few simple desires of his wife is like a barren tree. Such a tree is of no use," said Rajeshwari.

"What gall! Just because I refused to take you to the movie, you have the cheek to say that my presence or absence makes no difference. You women are simply impossible! You all mercilessly lash out at men and then go about playing the victim. 'Offence is the best defence' seems to the mantra of women these days."

"Enough! Stop this harangue I say. What drama, all to avoid taking me to the cinema" said Rajeshwari, walking away. Ten minutes later she emerged out of their bedroom, all dressed up to go out. A shocked Mr Murthy looked at her walk out right in front of him. He realised that this was the first time since they had got married, that she was going out alone. He also felt that she was fulfilling her small desires without being dependent on him or causing him any kind of inconvenience. 'Good for both of us,' he thought.

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Rajeshwari came back from in high spirits. "You missed a wonderful movie" she said chirpily, before disappearing inside. A few minutes later she came out and glancing at her husband said in an accusatory tone, "It seems like you have had your dinner. How naive of me to expect you to wait for me! It's only women who wait for their husbands, but no husband reciprocates the same."

"You had your way. Now don't start an argument. Don't you know that I have my dinner by 8 O clock. I don't snack mindlessly like you," replied Murthy.

"Did I ever stop you from watching movies or snacking? Anyway, going to a movie all by myself was a thrilling experience," she coyly said moving a stool closer to his armchair. He was stealthily watching her body language and listening to her while refraining from asking her anything, because he knew that she would volunteer to narrate everything, without any prompting from his side. "Can't you ask me about my outing today. I know you are feeling envious," she said. "It was truly an amazing experience. Going alone was wonderful. All these years I had to request you, sulk if you refused. I should have done this long ago. Fortunately, now I have realised that while being dependent on you, I lost out on a lot of things. Anyway, better late than never" she said teasingly.

"Good! Now that you have realised, go ahead and enjoy yourself to your heart's content" said Murthy, his voice dripping with sarcasm.

"Oh! Come on. Be a sport and listen, because I'm not yet through with what I want to share with. Anyway, tell me what do you think people assume when they see me?" asked Rajeshwari.

Murthy was perplexed. Rajeshwari naughtily continued, "How old do you people think I am?" Murthy was irritated with her coquettish behaviour. He lost his temper and said, "Stop this nonsense and tell me whatever you wanted to prattle."

"Please tell me. My family members tell me that if I dye my hair I do not a day older than forty. They say that my face does not reflect my true age."

"Who said this? You cannot hide your age by dyeing your hair."

"You don't dye your hair and you don't like my dyeing my hair. You are scared that people will say that you are an old man with a young wife. That's why every time I dye my hair you have to say something nasty."

"What kind of a meaningless talk is this? Why are you feeling so triumphant? Is going to a movie all by yourself an achievement?"

"Listen please," said Rajeshwari, and continued "I reached the theatre late because of your behaviour. The movie had started by then. I was flanked by two men on either side. That didn't bother me. I am not a young girl so why should I bother or worry. I am a grandmother. I told myself that they are young enough to be my sons or siblings. And I happily settled down to watch the movie." Murthy was curious and was all ears to his wife's narration.

"The man on my right was an elderly man. He sat quietly. The fellow on my left, was a young man, about thirty or thirty-five years old. He kept stealing glances at me. Initially I was irritated. I said to myself, 'am I a college girl that this fellow has to behave like this'? But later I started feeling that this was fun. Infact, I felt elated, because I probably don't look like an aunty and like a grandmother. I went on an ego trip because I felt that I was still attractive enough to arrest the attention of a young man. It is said that familiarity breeds contempt, and true to the proverb, husbands dismiss their wives as old hags, but when a stranger steals glances at any woman, she is bound to feel proud of herself...." said Rajeshwari, happily narrating her outing.

A myriad of expressions flitted across Murthy's fame. He blurted out, "Are you not ashamed of yourself? You are a grandmother. Some young fellow stares at you and you not only feel happy, but you proudly narrate the same."

"Why should I be ashamed? I have done nothing wrong. Is it my fault if some young man stares at m? He probably stared at me because he thought that I was beautiful. How would he know that I am a grandmother?" said Rajeshwari cheerfully.

She continued, "Anyway that is not all. Shall I tell you what happened later?"

Murthy's ego stopped him from asking her to continue with narration, but he was waiting with bated breath to listen to his wife.

"The young man looked at me when the lights came on during the interval. He probably thought that I was not bad looking. He went out and back with two soft drink bottles. He held out a bottle to me and said, 'aunty, this is for you' I refused. Later I accepted it since he was insistent. The lights were switched off. The screening started. He flung his arm, not around my shoulder, but on the chair. His foot touched my foot. I don't think it was deliberate. Nobody can sit for long without shifting in their seats. Any way the movie was over. 'Aunty, how will you go alone?' he said. He offered a lift on his bike. When he offered a lift, I got scared," she said.

"Why did you get scared? You enjoyed all the attention that fellow was showering on you. You should have gone for a jolly ride on his bike," said Murthy, with disgust.

"Actually I wanted go on a ride on the bike, but I was afraid of some known person seeing me enjoy the ride with a stranger."

"Oh! So you were scared of being seen by known people. Otherwise you were a game for a lift by a stranger."

"No. I am just kidding. Why will accept a lift from a stranger?" said Rajeshwari shyly.

"Any way, whether you accompany me or not is immaterial because now I have got the courage to go and watch movies all by myself. Now I will never bother you" Rajeshwari said in a sardonic voice and went inside.

* * *

Savitri, Rajeshwari's neighbour remarked naughtily, "Now that your husband accompanies you for movies you seem to have forgotten me." Rajeshwari blushed like a newly wedded bride.

"Yes. My husband and I enjoy going to movies together."

"Nice to see couples like you and your husband enjoying each other's company even at this age."

"Age is no bar for a couple to enjoy each other's company. Anyway sixties are no longer old age. As it is said '60's is the new 40's.' Age is not relevant for a couple to go to movies."

"Yeah! Your husband is scared that someone will kidnap his young wife and hence escorts you everywhere." Both, Savitri and Rajeshwari laughed heartily, enjoying their light banter.

*(*Vadlaginjalo Beyyapu Ginja - *Navya, September 9, 2009)*

10. The Conscience

"Mother, mother passed away," sobbed Radhika onthe phone, trying to convey the sad news to her elder brother Venu. Venu was shocked. It took him a few minutes to recover before he could ask, "When?"

"She passed away in her sleep last night. When we went to wake her up we found that she was no more. She hadn't eaten a morsel since yesterday. She even refused to drink some milk..."

"She seems to have died peacefully in her sleep. She lived a fulfilling life of 82 years. She died the way she lived, with dignity. That way she has been extremely blessed, not becoming bed-ridden and suffering," said Venu remembering his mother.

"Bhaiyya, you start immediately" said Radhika.

"Yes, but even if I start immediately, I will be able to reach only the day after tomorrow. Mother never wanted her dead body to be kept in the freezer box. You remember she was extremely unhappy when we had to keep our dad's body in the freezer box. Since Madhav is there with you, you'll go ahead and complete the rituals" said Venu.

"Youare right. Ma had repeatedly said that she wouldn't want to be kept in a freezer box. She remembered father and said that he had turned into log when he was kept in the freezer. She said, 'Venu came to India two months ago and he might find it difficult to come again immediately. Let Madhav light my pyre.' "Madhav and I were hurt when she started talking about her death.But mother said that her days were numbered. Kanthamma noticed a sea change in her in the past one month. Mother had stopped eating regularly quoting loss of appetite. She had become very listless and weak, I was told," said Radhika trying to suppress her tears.

"Why was I not informed about mother's condition?" asked Venu.

Radhika told her brother that their mother had said that "I am absolutely fine. Venu came to India recently and left. I don't think you should trouble him by informing him that I am sick, because I am fit as a fiddle."

"Then how did you and Madhav come to know about mother's illness" asked Venu.

"Gopal Uncle informed me saying that mother had become very weak and listless. She was not eating properly and also refused to consult the doctor" replied Radhika.

"Didn't you take her to the doctor?"

"We forced her to consult the doctor. All her medical parameters were normal. No hypertension, no diabetes, nothing. We never expected this. Anyway, Madhav will perform all the necessary rites and rituals, but you please try to come as soon as possible" pleaded Radhika.

"Yes. I will immediately try for the ticket. Please inform all our relatives. Ask Madhav to withdraw money from the bank to cover the expenses. After I reach, then we will look into all the other arrangements."

"Won't Bhabhi and kids come"? asked Radhika.

"I don't think all of us will be able to come. The children cannot miss their studies and your bhabhi accompanied me on my last visit. Anyway, I will see if it is possible for her to come. Take the help of Gopal uncle to make all the arrangements" said Venu and hung up the phone.

All the relatives and friends were duly informed. The house was crowded with the near and dear who had come to paid their last respects to the deceased soul. The villagers felt orphaned due to the passing away of the 82-year-old Yashodamma. Allher relatives, her two brothers, her younger sister, sister-in-law, brother-in-law, their families, grandchildren and the entire kith and kin were present for her funeral, cremation, and all the rites and rituals. The rituals and other connected rites were spread over twelve days and duly performed by both the sons of Yashdoamma.

"My sister had no children till the age of thirty. She performed various pujas, visited many temples so that some god might bless her with children. She became pregnant after she visited Dwaraka and Mathura. Then Venu was born. Within a span of five years she was blessed with three kids. She named all her three kids after Lord Krishna, because she believed that they were a blessing from Him. Today you three kids have performed all the rituals, just the way your mother wanted. I am sure her soul must be resting in peace" said Yashodamma's younger sister, Rayjam.

"It was such a blessing having her around. I could consult her for everything. If ever I could not meet her on some day, next day she would call without fail and enquire if everything was fine. Her passing away is an irreparable loss. Venu, your mother had changes a lot in the past one month. She had become dull and withdrawn. She became more and more distraught and distant" said Gopal uncle.

"Yes. That's true. She had drastically cut down on her food intake. She said that she had lost her appetite and that her days were numbered" added Kanthamma, their cook.

Seetalu, their maid glumly added. "Amma used spend all her waking hours in her garden. She loved gardening. She used to take such good care of the plants. She would pluck out the dried leaves, adjust the creepers, send across fresh vegetables to her acquaintances. But suddenly she became withdrawn and starting spending all her time in the sitting in the porch. Earlier she used pluck flowers in the evening and make beautiful garlands and distribute to everyone. But for the past one month she had stopped doing it and requested me to pluck flowers and make garlands."

"I had observed this change in her and pleaded with her to consult a doctor. But she adamantly refused and dismissed me saying that she is absolutely fine" recalled Gopal uncle.

"Uncle, we did take her to the doctor. She had no health problem" said Radhika.

"Why was not informed of this change in mother?" asked Venu with a lot of anguish.

"Your mother did not want you get worried. Since you had recently visited her, and you stay abroad, she felt that

you shouldn't be bothered. That's why you were not informed.

Instead I thought that the least that I could do is inform Radhika. So I called her and apprised her of the situation" said Gopal uncle.

"I visited mother and immediately informed Madhav" added Radhika.

"Many I times I requested mother to come stay with me. I told her that she should not stay alone in that huge, old house all by herself. She would say that she would feel claustrophobic in the city. She would say that she was very comfortable in here. She unwilling to leave behind her home, her garden, and her village. She often said that the entire village was there to help her if need arises. 'I have Kanthamma to cook, Seethalu and Rajaiah stay with me. I am comfortable. I want to spend my remaining days in this house.' She gathered herself after our father's death and managed everything all by herself" remembered Madhav.

"Now that your mother is no more, I don't think you people will come here again. Your father would have written a will. See what you children can do with this home, fields, and money. Settle all these issues before you'll disperse" suggested Rama Rao uncle.

"Father had not written any will. He left all these things to mother's discretion. Mother had said the house will be mine, fields will go to Madhav and Radhika will inherit money and jewellery" said Venu. Both the brothers discussed and requested their uncle to find prospective buyers for the home and land at least by the time they come to perform the first death anniversary of their mother.

"Radhi, have you made the payments due to the cooks, priests, the shamiyana fellow, servants, workers. You have settled all the accounts, right?" asked Venu. All the three siblings were sitting together and settling the accounts.

"Yes. I have written down everything. Heretake a look" replied Radhika.

"Seethalu had brought someone to help her. Have you paid that person? Have you settled the account of the person who was assisting Kanthamma,?" enquired Venu.

"Kanthamma did not bring anyone to assist her" replied Radhika, totally surprised.

"Then who was this lady who not only served us our tiffins, coffees, and meals all these twelve days, but was also generally available for everything?" asked an equally surprised Venu.

Radhika was shocked. "What! Don't you don't know her. She is our Pur... Purna. You didn't recognise her?"

It was Venu's turn to be shocked. He asked in disbelief, "What? She is Purna. Oh my God! She has changed beyond recognition. I thought that Kanthamma had brought her along for assistance. I did not say 'hello' to her. Atleast you people should have told me... She used to be so smart and lively. She used to freely and frequently come to our house. She must be hardly in her mid-40's, but she already she looks so old, haggard and run down" said Venu, composing himself.

"You are referring to Purna as she was twenty-five years ago."

"Yes. The last I saw her was twenty-five years ago. What about her husband, children...?" asked Venu in a disturbed tone.

"God has been so unkind to her. He has heaped one tragedy after the other on her. Her life is riddled with problems. Poor thing!" said Radhika.

"Really. What happened? I remember mother mentioning that Purna had got married after I had left for America. Then once mother mentioned that Purna's father had passed and that Purna was by then blessed with two children. Beyond that I have no information."

Radhika narrated the travails of Purna. Venu was left shocked and agitated after listening to Radhika. "Purna was married to the brother-in-law ofour village headmaster. The young man had come visiting his sister during his vacation and saw Purna in the temple. He liked Purna and decided to marry her. He sent the marriage proposal to Purna's father through his sister. He was a clerk in Accountant General's Office. His parents were no more. He did not demand any dowry. He wanted a simple wedding in the temple. Purna's father had retired by then. Since Purna was a motherless child, her father thought that he should perform her wedding as soon as possible. And he found nothing to object to in this proposal. The boy had a secure government job, no familial responsibilities and he himself had sent for Purna's hand in marriage.Purna was just not willing to marry since she wanted to complete her graduation. Purna's father requested mother to talk to Purna and convince her. She heeded mother's words and since there were very few auspicious days left, her wedding was performed within twenty days. It was a simple wedding

performed in the temple as per the groom's desire. Purna's husband was a gentleman. Purna was blessed with two children. But unfortunately, five years ago, her husband met with an accident, sustained head injury and slipped into coma and passed away one and half year later. The entire amount that they got from the Provident Fund was spent on his treatment. They do own a house. She is managing with the pension of Rs 8000/-. Her son was pursuing his graduation and daughter was in her intermediate. Her life turned into living hell. She started catering, making pickles, powders, and papads and giving tuitions to children of primary classes, to make both ends meet. She did not come to our village after her father passed away. Her son completed his B.com. and appeared for competitive exams, but did not succeed in securing a job. He got a job in a call centre. It looked as if she could breathe easy, when fate dealt another deadly blow. He fell under the wheels of a moving bus. He sustained spinal injury and his lower part of the body has been paralysed. He is confined to a bed. Doctors have said that he will never recover from this state. Can you imagine what she must be going through? Her grown up son has become a cripple, daughter yet to be settled. Her husband's pension is her only steady source of income. Her daughter has completed her B.Ed. She has secured a job in our village high school. That's why Purna is here. They are staying in a rented house. You have seen how she took charge of everything in our house after mother passed away."

"Oh my God! None of us were aware of this tragedy. Atleast if mother had told us we would have extended some help to Purna" exclaimed Venu.

"That's what mother had said. Purna had come a month ago and met mother and narrated her ordeal. Mother immediately gave her 10,000 rupees. Mother told me all these things and said that we all should help Purna, because she virtually grew up in our house, like our family member. Mother kept saying that she wants to help Purna in a substantial way."

"I will definitely extend all possible help. I will financially bear all the medical expenses of her son. I will go and meet her tomorrow" said an agitated Venu.

* * *

Venu could hardly sleep that night. He kept tossing and turning in his bed, remembering the Purna as she was and comparing her with the present Purna. He knew Purna right from her childhood. She was their neighbour. To put it into a nutshell their relationship was like of Sharath Babu, Parineeta, Devadas, Parvathi, Lalitha and Shekhar, wherein the hero belonged to a well to do family and the heroine came from a relatively poor background, yet these differences did not stop them from developing close ties. Venu, Madhav, Radhika and Purna, all four of them grew up together as children of one single family.

He had watched Purna grow up in front of his eyes. From a little girl in frocks to a young lady, Purna was part and parcel of their family. She used to dutifully hover around him like a puppy. He used to boss over her and get his works done. He would tease her and she would complain to his mother, "Aunty, look! Venu is teasing me." Purna was distantly related too, which made him take even more liberties in teasing her. After she grew up a little bit, she would follow Venu's mother

everywhere and learnt house hold chores. Purna was ten years old when she lost her mother. Since then Venu's mother took on the role of her mother. She used to come running with a comb in her hand and request Venu's mother to braid her hair. Venu's mother treated her as own child. Venu was her hero. She would virtually worship the ground on which he walked.She loved to interact with him and Venu would generally dismiss her. Purna then would walk away, hurt and crestfallen.

After completing high school, Venu, Madhav and Radhika one after the other, left for the city for highereducation. Purna's father declined to send her to city for further studies. Purna too was unwilling to leave her widowed father alone in the village. She decided to pursue her studies through the distance mode. Venu used to tease her saying, "She is not interested in studies. She just loves to read weeklies and novels, or chop vegetables, grind chutneys and make pickles or string garlands." Purna used to retort with hurt pride, "You just watch out. By the time you finish your engineering, I will complete my graduation" Venu would laugh and remark, "Oh! Come on. Give me break. You are not intellectually inclined. You continue reading romantic novels and keep daydreaming. Ma, find a farmer and get her married. She will be fine." This kind of light banter continued when Venu had completed his plus two and had come home during vacations. "You want to marry me off to a farmer. One fine I will garland you like Lalitha garlanded Shekar and then you will have to no option but to marry me" retorted Purna angrily.

"Oh! My god! You have such dreams! Forget it. I am not old fashioned person. I do not believe in this garlanding and marrying business. Do not nurture such hopes. I will go abroad for further studies and later marry a highly qualified and working girl. You think I will marry a country bumpkin like you?", snorted Venu without insolent swagger.

"Oh! There is no need for you to want to marry a person who has turned you down? Don't worry Purna. I will find a wonderful match for you," consoled Venu's mother. Amidst such teasing and light hearted banter, Venu, his siblings and Purna, all of them grew up together.

While harbouring no romantic notions about his relations with Purna, Venu committed a mistake. He had completed his engineering and come home for his vacation. All his relatives had left for Vizag to attend his cousin's wedding. He could not accompany them because he had to leave for Chennai the next day to secure his visa to the USA. Venu's mother had requested Purna to take of Venu's food requirements. Purna was standing near the stove and cooking. Venu wanted to tease her. He quietly tip-toed from behind, and caught her tightly in his arms. Purna turned around and was about to scream, but stopped herself and made no effort to release herself from his embrace. Purna had washed her hair and wearing jasmines in her plait. The fragrance was tempting. His arms further tightened around her. Purna clung to him. Privacy and youth took over and the untoward happened. Once she realised what had happened, Purna fled from the bedroom. Venu came to his senses.He started sweating profusely from fear that Purna might tell his mother or her father about this incident. 'How can I ever face them'

worried Venu. He did not come out of the bedroom that night. Seethalu came and requested him to have his dinner. He declined and before leaving by the early morning bus, he gave thousand rupees to the maid and requested her to hand over that amount to Purna. He kept asking t himself over and over again "Why did I do such a mindless thing? What possessed me and drove me to such a heinous act' Within a few minutes after he had given money to the maid, Purna stormed into his room, flung the money on his face and left without a word.

That was the last time he had seen her. He left within a week for the US. His parents saw him off at the airport. More than a month later, his mother informed him that Purna had got married. He heaved a sigh of relief. "Thank God! Purna had kept the secret to herself."

* * *

The next day Venu announced his plans to his siblings. They were surprised at his decision. He wanted to give away the house to Purna. They said that he need not give his entire share but instead it would be fine to financially help her out.

"What will I do with old house in this small village? At the most it might fetch me a couple of lakhs if I sell it. Purna needs some shelter right now. If she has a shelter of her own, she can at least save on the rent. She has many more responsibilities to fulfil, her daughter's marriage, son's medical expenses... I really don't need the money this house can fetch me if I sell it" said Venu.

He then requested his sister to fetch his mother's will. "I

will request Gopal Uncle to register this house in Purna's name" said venu.

Radhika brought the papers from the safe and was surprised on finding a fresh will written by their mother. She read out the will which stated that this house shall be transferred to Purna's son, Murali, and Purna shall be the legal custodian.

All the three of them were shocked on reading the will which further stated that, 'the fields shall belong to Madhav, Radhika will inherit the money and jewellery. The money that will come from the sale of this house is of no consequence to Venu since he is earning well is the USA. Purna, who grew up as one of my own children, needs this home. That's why I have made this new will. It shall be Venu's responsibility to see that my will be executed in letter and spirit'.

Venu was a surprised that his mother had already thought of what he wanted to do.

"Venu, how can you have no share in the property. You take half my share," said Madhav.

"It's OK. I earn in dollars. I had already decided to give this to Purna even before we knew what mother had written in the will. Radhika, will you accompany me to Purna's house. I want to see her and her son and hand over mother's will to her," said Venu.

Radhika replied, "Madhav and I have already visited her. You go and meet her. There is lot of work at home to be completed. I will stay back and supervise the same."

* * *

Purna opened the door. Venu noticed a sparkle in her eyes. "I am extremely sorry Purna. I just did not recognise you. That's why I did not speak to you. I have come to apologise," said Venu.

Purna smiled listlessly. "It is not your fault that you didn't recognise. Please come in," she said.

It was a small tiled house, consisting of two tiny rooms and a kitchen. In the second room he found Purna's bed-ridden son, reduced to a skeleton, lying on the cot. He briefly gazed at the boy who was more dead than alive and asked Purna, "You went through all this all alone. Didn't you feel like informing us?Did you assume that none of us would help you? I was not aware of all these things till Radhika told me. The least we would have done is to help you financially."

"How many times can one help anyone? Life has become very difficult. My son is an immobile corpse and I am a mobile corpse." She tried to stop her tears, but in vain. "Look at my son, Venu! He is completely immobilized. He cannot even drive away a fly if it comes anywhere near him. He is totally dependent on me. I am doomed to suffer. 'Mother! Give me some poison or give me some sleeping pills. I don't want to live'. This is my son's constant refrain. I cannot bear to see him suffer like that. Sometimes I feel like really releasing him from his suffering. I would not wish this kind of suffering even for my worst enemy," said Purna sobbing bitterly. Venu's eyes welled up with tears.

"Purna, please stop crying. I will pay all the medical bills. You take him to Hyderabad for treatment. May be an operation will help. I will extend all help," Venu said trying to console her.

"No Venu. It's of no use. His spine is totally damaged. Doctors have declared that nothing can be done about his condition. Anyway, my problems will persist. Come, we will sit in the other room."

"Your daughter's gone to school?"

"Yes. Her salary and my pension money is keeping us alive. I am sorry. Ever since you came I am narrating my woes," Purna said trying to force herself to laugh.

"Purna, I might not be able to lessen your sorrow, but mother has willed our house on your son' name. You can stay in our house. At least you can save on the rent and your will roof of your own. I will request Gopal Uncle to register it in your son's name. After we leave you can move in. Please take these papers. Don't throw them on my face like you did that day. This is mother's will," said Venu.

Purna looked straight into Venu's eyes and replied, "That day I threw that money on your face because I thought you were trying to put a price on me. My ego was hurt. I was angry. But today, I will willingly take it because I have no right to deny my son what rightfully and legally belongs to him."

Venu was nonplussed. He could not comprehend what she was trying to say.

Purna reiterated, "Yes. I cannot deny my son his ancestral inheritance."

Venu was shocked. He looked Purna's son in disbelief. Purna slowly nodded her head and said, "Yes! Your guess is right."

"Yes Venu. For the past twenty-five years, I have kept this secret buried in my heart. But your mother guessed right in a second. She came to see Murali and the moment she saw him, she exclaimed, "Venu!" I could not say anything. All that I did was cry. She understood everything. She made me tell the truth. She was very angry, for not having told her. She felt guilty as if she had personally wronged me. She said that she now understood why I was not willing to get married. Murali looks exactly like you. As he was growing up, the similarities became striking. I stopped coming to this village after my father passed away, because I was afraid that someone would say that Murali looks like you." Venu stood like a statue, listening to Purna' narration. He did not know how to respond.

Finally, after what seemed like an eternity, he pulled himself together and replied, "There is no point in asking you to forgive me now. It has been twenty-five years since that incident. But please forgive me if you can."

"You are not to be entirely blamed. It was my love for you, and a hope that if such thing happens, you will definitely marry me, made me behave the way I did that day. I did not want to pull myself from your embrace that day. Since I got married immediately after that incident, nobody could suspect anything amiss. Did you observe that I have allowed Murali's hair and beard to grow? Do you know why I did that? I did it so that nobody will be able to find any resemblance with you. Aunty recognised immediately. I don't want that to happen again. Ifeel that my son is paying for the sin I committed." Purna was overcome with grief. Venu hung his hand in remorse. He was feeling terribly guilty. Purna continued, "I wanted to confess everything to aunty when she was trying

to convince me to get married. But after listening to her, I changed my opinion. Aunty had said, 'Purna, if you are turning down this proposal because you hope that Venu will marry, then let me tell you will be disappointed. I had broached this subject a couple of times. Venu airily brushed it aside saying that you and Radhika are one and the same for him. He desired to marry a working girl. So do not let go of this match. The boy seems to be good since he is not making any demands.' I did not want to force myself into your life. So I accepted the proposal and got married. My husband was a wonderful human being. I have no complaints against him. But it is my misfortune that I lost him too."

Venu walked out, pale and lifeless. He did not have any chance to wash off his sins by helping Purna. Mother had denied him even that opportunity. Even if Purna forgives him, Mother will never forgive him.That is why she did not want him to light her pyre.Now he understood why mother had become detached in the past one month before she passed away.

Mother did not want to see him ever again. That is why she left this world before he could meet her again. Hopeless tears kept falling all along the way from Purna' home. Twenty-five years ago he escaped from the mistake he committed. Today and forever till his last breath, the paralysed young life, confined to the bed shall continue to haunt him. Venu realised that there shall be no escape from this life sentence. The conscience will continue with its work.

*(*Manase Siksha - *Vipula, June 2013)*

11. The Man

"Babu, our Vishwanatham sir is no more. I received acall soon after you left for your morning walk," said Kanthamma, the cook. Krishnamurthy had just come back from his morning walk. Though this news was expected any moment, he felt a sense of shock on hearing the same. "Oh! When did he pass away? Why didn't they call me on my mobile? I would have gone directly to his place," asked Krishnamurthy taking off his sports shoes.

"You left your cell phone at home, babu," answered Kanthamma. "OK. Give me a cup of coffee. I will have it and go and offer my condolences and also find out the time of cremation," he said before disappearing inside to change his clothes.

On reaching Vishwanatham's house, he found number of people standing in front of the apartment complex, in front of the flat, on the stairs and in the corridors. Some were seated outside the home on the chairs and the ladies were seated inside. They all had come to pay their final respect to the departed soul. Krishnamurthy spotted his close friends, Venkateshwara Rao, Rama Rao and Chalapathi. They all came towards him and said they too had come a little while ago. One of them said that "Vishwanatham has been released from

the hell he was going through for the past three months." Another friend agreed and added, "Yes indeed! It is a relief for the family members too." Krihnamurthy nodded in agreement and said, "I pity Sharadamma. Poor lady!" He spotted Vasu, Vishwanatham's son and immediately stopped himself from saying anything further. He broke away from his friends, walked up to Vasu, and laid his hand on his shoulder and consoled him, "Sorry Vasu, I just got to know and came here immediately. What time did Father pass away?"

"Don't know Uncle. He passed away in his sleep. Mother woke up in the morning and found that he was no more," said Vasu in a sad tone.

"Anyway it is a relief for your father. Now you have look into what needs to be done now. By the way, have your sisters arrived?"

"Elder sister was already here. The younger is on her way. She should be here in another two hours. By 11 we want complete the cremation," said Vasu and went inside.

Krishnamurthy came back to his friends and asked if they had offered their condolences to Sharadamma, Viishwanatham's wife. Venkateshwara Rao said, "No. We too came a few minutes before you did. All the ladies are sitting inside. Will it be okay to go in now"?

"I think it's okay. We have to pay our condolences to Sharadamma. We have known her for the past ten years. Come let us go and meet her." All the four friends went inside the house. The ladies moved aside to give way to the men. The body was laid on the floor in the hall. A lighted lamp was placed at the head of the body. A basil plant was kept beside Vishwanatham's life less form. Bhagavad Gita was playing out softly from a stereoplayer. Sharadamma was sitting in the

room adjoining the hall. She was sorrow personified. She was basically on the slimmer side, but she looked gaunt and sick. The past three months had been very harsh on her. She was busy taking care of her comatose, bed-ridden husband. Added to the physical stress of nursing her invalid husband, was the mental pain that she had been through. The physical and mental stress took their toll on her. She was reduced to skeleton, hollow cheeks, sunken eyes that were swollen due to crying.

The four friends of her late husband went to talk to her. Her eyes welled up when she saw them. "He has been released from pain. That should be solace for you," said Krishnamurthy, offering her his condolences. She joined her palms together, as if offering her prayer, either to the invisible god, or to the soul of her deceased husband and said, "Yes! He has been released. But what about me?" and starting crying again. Kavita, her daughter placed her hand on her mother's shoulder and tried to comfort her saying, "No point in crying. Father is not going to come back." Sharadamma' daughter-in-law, who was watching all this, threw an angry glance and walked away in a huff. Her behaviour did not escape Krishnamurthy's eyes.

"The other daughter is yet to arrive. We will come again at 11o'clock. There is no point in crowding here. If we leave now, at least those are coming to pay their respects will have space to do so," said one of four friends. "Yes, that's right. These apartment dwellings do not allow enough space for people when they have to gather for any need" they thought to themselves.

* * *

For the ten years, five friends used to sit on a bench, in the colony park. It took them sometime to get used to the absence of one of them. "We used to be called the Pandavas. The youngest of us has left first," said Chalapathi, in a sad voice. "I think it is time for each of us, one after the after, to get ready to settle all our accounts, and depart," said Rama Rao, philosophically.

"We introduced ourselves to each other on this bench. In the past decade, we had become very close to each. We discussed politics, jobs, retirements, children's education, their careers, weddings, grandchildren, journeys to the US, old movies, old songs, old novels, agreement that everyday one of us had to tell a joke, half an hour walking, one hour talking among ourselves. How time has flown!" said Krishnamurthy recalling their friendship.

"We are from different regions, worked for different organisations, bought apartments here- and this bench in the park brought us together and time cemented our friendship," said retired Justice Chalapathy.

"We came so close that we could comfortably share our problems, sorrows and happiness with each other. Frankly speaking, we four of us really do any big problems, except the fact that our children are not with us," said D.I.G Rama Rao. "Yes! Vishwanatham used to say that you people feel bad because your children are not with you all. I feel bad because I have to stay with my son. Isn't it strange?" added lawyer Venkateshwara Rao.

Krishnamurthy, retired chief engineer, recalled his late friend saying, "You people are lucky. You don't have to worry about money. Since you all have retired from government

service, you all receive a decent amount as pension, at the end of every month. Nothing like government jobs! The salary might be less when compared with the private sector, but you are assured of financial security in your old age. Private sector provides no such benefit. They just thrust some money into your hands and ask you to leave when it your time is up."

He continued with his reverie, saying, "He was right. But he was equally naive. He gave away all his provident fund money to his son. How innocent he was! Poor fellow, he had already borrowed money to perform the weddings of his sisters, after the death of his father. He shouldered all the responsibilities as the eldest son. By the time he was through with the responsibilities as a son, he became a father and had to take care of his own family. He could not save the twelve lakhs of his PF money. His son suggested that we buy a three-bedroom flat, so that we can save on rent. He kept about three lakhs with him and gave away the rest of the amount, without as much a blink."

"How could one be so naive? We should will our property to children only after our death. If we give away everything to them while we still alive, then we will have to depend on them for everything."

"I think we should learn a lesson from his life. His son took away all the money, and then started behaving as if his parents were free loaders. Poor thing! He was badly hurt by the behaviour of his son and daughter-in-law. He used to feel very bad for his wife, who he felt was suffering more he was. She was being treated as an unpaid cook and servant by their son and his wife. Vishwanatham held himself for responsible for his wife's suffering. He used to say that if at least due

respect and concern is demonstrated, then nobody minds doing the household chores. He used to be acutely embarrassed even to discuss these issues."

"To make matters worse, both Vishwanatham and his wife were suffering from diabetes and hypertension. The interest from his savings was barely sufficient to cover their daily dose of medicines. The daughter-in-law used to pass snide remarks saying that they were a drag on their resources."

"Poor Sharadamma! Sometimes on some Sunday, if I ever visited them, I would find her slogging throughout, weak and pale faced," recalled Krishnamurthy, painfully.

"After he fell ill, matters took a turn for the worse. Hospital expenses mounted. He suffered from a stroke, then another time a heart attack and finally slipped into coma. All his savings were spent on his medical bills. The poor woman has been reduced to a permanently unpaid slave in that house." All the four friends recalled the past and realised that there was nothing that they could do except for sympathising with their deceased friend's wife.

* * *

It was Vishwanatham's the first death anniversary. His son, Vasu performed the rituals very casually, just to avoid comments that people might pass otherwise. The four friends attended the rituals, partook the meal that was offered to them and before leaving they went to meet Sharadamma. They were pained beyond words when they found her in a shocking state of ill health and neglect. That evening, the four friends sat on the bench in the park, without conversing with each other, as if there was nothing left to talk.

* * *

Vasu kicked open the gate, barged in angrily and started shouting at Krishnamurthy who was relaxing in his armchair and reading the newspaper. "Where is my mother? Call her immediately!" Krishnamurthy lifted his head from the newspaper and calmly replied, "She is inside. You can go and meet her."

"I will not step inside your house. Ask her to come out. She has a lot of explaining to do."

"Yes. Tell me. I am all ears," said Sharadamma, standing at the threshold. Vasu glared at his mother and burst out, "I never ever dreamt that my mother would get so brazen, that she would shamelessly brush aside the societal norms, and go and cohabit with another man. I am ashamed of your behaviour. You are anyway now beyond redemption. But before resorting to such brazen behaviour, did you at least not think about your children. It has been a loss of face for us. You have been missing for the past five days. I went around enquiring from our family and acquaintances. Nobody seemed to have a clue. Finally, I had to lodge a missing complaint in the police station. Last evening when my son was cycling on the road, he said he had spotted you. I believe he called out to you and you just ignored him and disappeared inside. I came home late that day. My son waited for me to convey the fact that he spotted you here. He anyway told his mother before going to bed. After I returned Sandhya told me. I just could not believe it. But now that I am after seeing you here, I realise that what my son and wife said is true. Aren't you ashamed of leaving home without informing anyone and staying in some outsider' home, that too a place where there are no women folk."

"I am not staying in some outsider's home. I am staying in my husband's home. I have done nothing wrong. You better think twice before saying anything," said Sharadamma tersely. Vasu was shocked. Words failed him. His face turned red due to uncontrollable anger. He starting shouting once again, "What? Your husband? This man? O God! How shameless can one get! You wanted a husband at this age, that too just a year after father's death? How brazen! And how blatantly you are announcing that he is your husband?"

"Lower your voice, Vasu. It is bad manners to go to somebody's home and create a ruckus," warned Sharadamma. Vasu was further enraged when he saw that Krishanmurthy continued to read the newspaper nonchalantly, as if he believed that it was issue between a mother and son and that they would sort it between them. He turned towards Krishnmurthy and burst out, "You are a senior citizen. A person who enjoys a status in the society. But what a shameless thing you have done. You married your friend's wife. That too just after a year after your friend's death. Do you deserve to be called a gentleman? How indecent! You did such a despicable thing, that too at this age. Was this your idea or was it that woman's?"

"Vasu! Whatever you have to say, you will tell me. I will not keep quiet even if you utter a single derogatory word against my husband," said Sharadamma, in firm voice.

"Wow! New husband and so new love, I guess! At this age you wanted man, a husband. That's why you committed this sin," Vasu snarled at his mother. Krishnamurthy folded the newspaper and put it aside and tried to pacify the angry young man, "Look Vasu, your mother..." "Please don't try to

justify your action. You lost your wife and soon after my father passed away, you trapped my mother..." Vasu said sarcastically.

"Shut up Vasu! You have no right to say anything against that gentleman. Just leave this place. I don't owe anyone any explanation. Yes, I married him to satisfy my lust. Is it what you are trying to say? Fine! You are free to assume whatever you desire to. You need not see this sinner's ever again, because that's what you think I am. You need come to see me even after my death. I am here because I had no one to call my own," said Sharadamma.

"I thought that I had a mother. That's why I came to see you. If I had known that you are basically a shameless woman, I would have never ever come to see you. From this day you are as good as dead."

"Yes. Quite a few mothers are willing are stay in old age homes because they have sons like you who declare that they consider their mothers as good as dead even when the mother is still alive. Mothers believe that her sons and their families are their own children. But when sons start behaving as if their mothers are unwelcome, what is the poor the mother supposed to do? The old mother might slog like a bonded labour, yet if she is treated as a freebooter, then the poor mother is left with no other option but to find her own way," replied Sharadamma.

Vasu was livid with anger. "Oh! Helping around the house is anathema to you, is it? We are working couple. By lending a helping hand in doing household chores or taking care of the grandchildren, you felt you were slaving out. As a mother, could you not do at least that much?"

"Children are never a burden for the mother. But when

an aged mother is burdened with responsibilities that are beyond her due to her old age, you think that the mother is a shirker and a pile on. No mother will ever shirk her responsibilities, and even if when the burden is too much, she will willingly shoulder them if her children show some love, concern and respect. But when she is does not receive even these simple things then she has no other way but to go and join some charitable trust. But God has been very kind to me and he has sent me a saviour in the form of Krishnamurthy. Please Vasu, let me peacefully lead the rest of my life in the company of this gentleman. Now kindly leave."

"Now stop being melodramatic. Why are you making allegations that I did not take care of you? Why don't you confess that you have trapped this man who is loaded with money?"

Sharadamma laughed "You are welcome to assume anything. But now I understand your problem. You are mighty upset because you have lost a reliable, full time slave who worked for free." Vasu glared at his mother and Krishnamurthy and walked away angrily.

* * *

"You would have understood by now as to why I have asked you both to come immediately. I thought it is better you both hear from me, instead of getting to know from others," said Krishnamurthy, beckoning his son, Vishal and daughter Suma into the room.

"Dad! Why did you have to do such a thing, that too at this age? Are you aware of the kind of things people are saying

about you? And her son is going around speaking despicable things about you. It so embarrassing," Vishal said.

"Dad! Even my husband is making fun of you and there is nothing I can do to stop him. We know Dad that you have become lonely after mother passed away. But to remarry at the age of 70, that too an old woman, the widow of your friend! It is so cheap. You might feel that you need some company. But this not the way to behave. Your one senseless act has embarrassed not only your children, but also your grandchildren. We have become the laughing stock of the society. Whatever respect you commanded has been lost because of this one hasty decision you took," said Suma, angrily.

"Yes I know Suma. I am not a fool not to realise what everyone is talking of me. I did not do this to fulfil any carnal desires. In this past ten years since your mother's death, I have got used to a life of loneliness. I have tried to cope with loneliness by developing some hobbies and generally keeping myself occupied. Meals are not an issue, thanks toKanthamma , our cook."

"Then why did you have to do such a thing and push us into an embarrassing position?" asked Vasu.

"I took such a step just to rescue Sharadamma from hell she was going through and provide a decent and dignified living for the rest of her life."

"Dad, there are innumerable women in this world who are in worse situations. But where was the need to take such a mindless step?" countered Vishal.

"People will definitely talk. But how long will they gossip? Till they find something else to talk about, right? Yes,

there are any number of women like Sharadamma in this world. But when I saw that dear friend's widow, being neglected, insulted and reduced to the state of a living corpse, I felt that I should do something to help her lead a dignified life. She is 63 years old and at least for the rest of her she should be provided with a decent living. I did this because I felt that late friend's soul will rest in peace."

"You could have financially helped her Dad. Why did you have to marry her and become the talk of the town?" asked Suma, bitterly.

"Yes dad. You could have done that. You could have bought her medicines or helped her financially," said Vishal.

"Vishal, do you think a lady like Sharadamma would ever accept financial help from others? Assuming that her she accepts such help, and then her son and daughter-in-law get to know about this, then they would make her life even more difficult. I saw her carrying heavy bags, unable to walk, dragging herself and I helped her carry them to her house. Her daughter-in-lawr saw this and made her displeasure known. When I visited their home a couple of times and asked her 'Amma, are you not taking your medicines regularly? You look weak and pale. She replied, 'Who should I live for?' Her son casually brushed off her ill health by saying, 'You know that diabetes and hypertension have become very common these days.'

Krishnamurthy continued, "Another time I saw her at a shop. She was barely able to walk. I told her, 'Amma, Vishwanatham was a close friend. He was always worried about you. His soul will not rest in peace if you do not take care of yourself. You should take care of your health as long

as you are alive. You have seen yor suffer after his health suffered and he became bed-ridden. So please do not refuse these medicines.' It is with great difficulty that I managed to convince her to take the medicines I bought for her. Her daughter-in-law saw the medicines and created a ruckus, I believe. Under such circumstances, was it possible for me to go to their house and extend any kind of help?"

"Oh! I see. You wanted show sympathy and help her. But do you realise that you have pushed us into an embarrassing situation. But kind of an explanation are we supposed to give to the people when they ask us uncomfortable questions?" asked Suma, sarcastically.

"If she was so unwilling to accept any financial help from you, then how did she agree to marry you? I think she fell for your money and property and felt that she can lead a very comfortable life. A gold-digger!" said Vishal , angrily.

"You are right. What is the use of occasionally accepting a couple of hundreds? She saw dad's money, home and other assets and decided that marriage is the best way to usurp his property," added Suma.

"Please do not insult her by such talk. She had no role whatsoever in this whole thing. Let me tell you that you both will legally inherit all my property after my death. Now I am drawing a pension of Rs 25,000 thousand. After my death, she will shift to an old age home and lead her life, because as a wife she is entitled to half of my pension if I predecease her. You know that children are not entitled to their father's pension. Her husband's job did carry the benefit of a pension. Whatever money he had got after his retirement he gave it to his son in good faith. After that he had to suffer at their hands and finally died a miserable death. Sharadamma too was

dependent on them and was suffering from utter neglect. She had to be shown a decent way out from her misery. This marriage is only to make her legally eligible for my pension. She was just not willing to accept to this proposal. My friends and I, with great difficulty managed to convince her. This was the honourable way for her to get out of miserable life. We convinced her that she should not bother what other people will say, but instead live peacefully. She is like a sister to me. That is why instead of having a traditional wedding, we opted for a registered marriage, so that legally she is entitled to a decent life."

"If you had earlier told us and her children about this we could have avoided all this sordidness," said Vishal, feeling sheepish for his earlier behaviour.

"If we had told this earlier, her son would have certainly tried to put spokes. And if everybody comes to know, then many would start exploiting this plan for selfish reasons. Then the government might object to such marriages, if they feel that such marriages are only for pensions. That is why my friends and I kept this a secret till the marriage was solemnised. Please I request you both not to say anything to anybody, including Sharadamma. That is why I asked you both to come so that I could explain everything. Please show some mercy on her.That's all I request of you," Krishnamurthy said, joining his palms together.

Suma and Vishal realised that they had been hasty in their behaviour. They realised that father was a not any man but that he was 'TheMan among men', a noble soul.

*(*Purushulandu... - *Brown Academy, 2011)*

12. Bhavana

"Daddy, I am planning to remarry," announced Bhavana as she approached her father who was sitting in the balcony, sipping his coffee, and reading the day's newspaper. Without lifting his head from the newspaper, he casually said, "I see!" Bhavana was incensed at his attitude. She angrily said, "It is your daughter's marriage. Are you not interested in knowing who I wish to marry?" "How does it matter to you? You will anyway decide for yourself. Do I have any say in anything that concerns you? Have you ever taken my advice seriously? If I object now to this marriage now, will you even give the idea a second thought?" said Prasad Rao, shifting his gaze from the paper to his daughter's face. Bhavana was livid with anger. "Who I marry is none of your concern, is it so?" she asked provocatively. "That goes without saying. Our opinions, likes and dislikes, suggestions, advice never held any value to. Have you ever listened to us?" said Prasad Rao, while laying great stress on each word that he spoke, just to express his displeasure.

Bhavana wanted to say something, but stopped herself, and said, "You are angry with me because I divorced Kashyap. You wanted me to lead a life of compromise that too with a

person who I disliked. If I had done so, for your sake, you would have been happy and considered me an obedient child. You do not like it when I seek happiness, isn't it? Anyway there is no need for me to lead a life of compromise," said Bhavana, haughtily.

"Prasad Rao smiled and said, "I do not recall having forced you to marry Kashyap. All I remember is you saying that he was your colleague, that your courtship went on for 18 months, and then you announced your decision to marry him".

Bhavana could not miss the sarcasm in his voice. She said,"He failed to understand my feelings and did not live upto my expectations. He was no longer the Kashyap I had known before marriage. Just because I had married him, didn't mean that I continue to live and adjust to an unhappy marriage. I had failed to assess him properly. Now I want to lead my life afresh. Do you think I am wrong?" she prompted her father.

Prasad Rao smiled at her and said, "Bhavana, I said this any number of times and I will say it once again. Life may not give all that we desire or no one might give us on a platter all that we want. We have to create a decent life for ourselves. It is utter foolishness to expect someone to make life easy for us. People who have such expectations from others are utter fools. And unfortunately you are one among them. As a human being, and especially as a spouse, before expecting something from our partner, we need to assess our contribution to the relationship. It is not always right to expect from the other.

At least now, think over what I have just said."

"Karthik is not that sort of a person" said Bhavana, confidence dripping from her voice. "Oh! Karthik is that boy who comes to our place and you go out with him," said Prasad Rao. "Yes, it is the same person,"said Bhavana very enthusiastically. "He is my colleague. He is very smart, active and fun-loving," she said. "You had used the same adjectives for Kashyap too"said Prasad Rao.

"You need not remind me. I was hasty then and wrong in my judgement," she answered harshly.

"I hope this decision too has not been made in haste. I repeat, remember, courtship is different and whether it is man or a woman, they are bound to change once they get married. The love, affection, passion, ardour, enthusiasm is bound to lessen in the face of reality and responsibilities that a marriage entails. This is something that all young lovers should understand. I have nothing more to say now," he said and buried his face in the newspaper. Bhavana glared at her father and finally walked away in ahuff.

"What happened? Why is she so angry?" asked Sunanda, coming out of the kitchen. "Your daughter was to remarry" said Prasad Rao. "Did she seek your permission? What did you say? By the way, who is the lucky guy?" said Sunanda, laughing.

"Lucky or should we say unlucky" answered Prasad Rao. He suddenly turned serious and said, "Karthik."

"I guessed so. I have been watching her behaviour for quite some time now because I felt that something was going on. But I didn't ask her since she would definitely bring up the subject. That boy is her junior in the office. I cannot understand what made her fall for him," said Sunanda.

"He is not like Kashyap. He is very jovial and lively, I believe. This is what she said," said Prasad Rao, sarcastically.

"Does she know what she wants out of her life? If she had her priorities right, she would not have let go of a person like Kashyap. This boy Karthik is very young and is accompanying her to parties, pubs and clubs, so she thinks that he is a very jovial person. She is nearing thirty, yet she lacks maturity. She is behaving like a teenage girl," said Sunanda, in a worried tone. She again continued, "What did you say? Did you agree? That karthik looks like her younger brother. Marriage, divorce... all these things have happened in her life in quick succession. And now remarriage. At least now she has to think over and not do things in haste," said Sunanda, sounding worried.

"My saying 'yes' or 'no' hardly matters to her. She has just informed me because she is staying with us. Didn't she tell you?" asked Prasad Rao. Sunanda replied, "She casually mentioned. Do I have a say in her life? She will do what she wants to do. I think the fault lies in our upbringing. Since she is our only child, we indulged her and that is where we made a mistake. These girls are misusing the freedom given to them. Just because they are financially stable, they feel that they need not listen to anyone. It's our faul,." Sunanda said in a plaintive tone.

"Sunanda, gone are the days when children could be confined within certain boundaries. We cannot do much other than being mere spectators. We try to advise them. If they heed our words then it's fine, otherwise we just have to leave everything to their fate," said Prasad Rao.

"But can we remain detached? Can we just leave her to fate? Can we just say 'since you are financially independent, go ahead and do whatever you want? Are we so detached that we can silently watch if she lands in trouble again?

Anyway, I will take to her. If she still wants to go ahead with this marriage, then there is nothing much we can do about it" said Sunanda, while picking the empty cups and walking away.

⁂

"Karthik, my parents are not very keen on our wedding. They are not stating their opinion," said Bhavana. "My people are dead against this marriage. They do not see any need for me to marry a girl who is older than me and that too a divorcee. They have made their stand very clear. They have emphatically said that if I do not heed their advice, then I am free to do what I want and they shall have nothing to do with me after this marriage," Karthik said.

"What shall we do then? They will come around after we get married. How long can they remain angry? Let us go to the Register's office and initiate the process," said Bhavana. "Let us wait for some more time. We will try to convince our elders. Can we ever be happy if we burn our boats with our people? Give me some more time," answered Karthik.

"OK. As you wish," said Bhavana, reluctantly.

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A fortnight had passed. Karthik did not broach the subject of marriage. It did not seem as if he was going to talk about it anywhere in the near future. Bhavana asked him a

couple of times if he had discussed once again with his parents. "No. Not yet. I could find the right opportunity to talk to them," he said. Bhavana felt that he was trying to stall the whole issue. Of late, he seemed to avoid her too. "I am busy working on a project. Can't meet you," he said a few times. Bhavana waited for another fortnight for some sort of positive indication from Karthik. Finally she ran out of patience and confronted him, "Karthik, why are you trying to avoid me?You said that you will talk to your people in two days and get back to me. Did n' t your parents agree?"

Karthik nodded. "They are dead against this alliance. We cannot live happily if we go against them," he said, avoiding her eyes. "Your expression tells me that it is you who is not happy with this idea," she said, looking straight at him.

Karthik hung his head. He was quiet for a minute. Finally, he lifted his head and said, "It is not just my parents saying no. I am not able to express myself properly... actually you see... I am like a student before you and you are like a boss...I am worried about your reaction to everything so I am all the time trying to please you, trying to impress you.As aboyfriend I may have succeeded in impressing you, but after marriage can I continue to do so? Your nature scares me. As I get to know you more and more, I am beginning to realise that you can are very demanding and stubborn. You always want your way. You always feel that you can never be wrong.I always have to keep in mind your demands and act accordingly, constantly try to feed your ego... as a boyfriend I may succeed in taking everything sportively in my stride, but after marriage, I doubt if I can continue to do the same. If as

a husband I start asserting myself, then it might lead to ego clashes between us. Love and understanding might then be the first casualty. I will constantly be trying to live up to your expectations, and try not to slip into Kashyap's shoes. Do I have the wherewithal to negate my personality and dance to your tunes? After meeting you my mother had said that 'you are beautiful, but she did not get the feeling that you are the right life partner for me. She did not even find an iota of love in your eyes. She could not find even a trace of respect or grace in your words or your behaviour.All that your beautiful face reflects is arrogance. 'She is highly qualified, is well placed, and beautiful. But she lacks the qualities of patience, tolerance and adjustment, which are essential to lead a contented and successful married life,' my said. You might ask as to how did she conclude such things? Mom said that 'the moment you look at some people you can fairly guess such things.' Once I starting reflecting on mom's words I felt as if my own feelings about you were coming from her mouth. Especially in this past one week, your language, your demands made me realise that mom is right..." said Karthik.

Bhavana was taken aback. "Sorry Bhavana, I cannot continue with sham of a relationship. I cannot let go of my people and settle down with you," said Karthik, frankly. Bhavana was seething with rage. She wanted to hit back with all vengeance. She opened her mouth to say something, but held back and walked away angrily.

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Sunanda observed that in the past ten days, Karthik had not come to their house in the even once and her daughter was moping around the house. Finally, she asked her daughter

at the breakfast table, "Why is Karthik not coming to our place? Is he travelling?" Bhavana did not answer her mother. Sunanda again asked her, "You were planning your marriage. Have you finalised the date?" "I am not getting married," Bhavana replied. Prasad Rao and his wife looked at each other. "Why" asked Sunanda, surprised. "I am getting married. That's all," said Bhavana curtly. Sunanda looked perplexed.

"What happened? Did he refuse to marry?" asked Sunanda. Bhavana could detect sarcasm in that question. She glared at her mother. "I refused to marry him," Bhavana replied, hervoice dripping with arrogance. But the mother could detect loss of pride in her voice. "So these love and courting are only for enjoying, and not all love affairs end up in marriage..." said Sunanda looking her daughter. "Don't be stupid, mummy" said Bhavana, completely exasperated. Sunanda was taken aback, because her daughter had earlier never called her 'stupid'.

Prasad Rao and his wife did not feel sorry that the marriage did not take place. Rather they felt relieved. They were willing to remain 'stupid', provided their daughter did not do 'stupid' things.

*(*Bhavana - *Surabhi, October, 2010)*

13. The Common Man

The doorbell rang. Parthasarathy went and opened thedoor and was aghast on seeing a fair complexioned, short haired, bespectacled lady clad in a big bordered cotton saree and a blouse that matched with the colour of the border of her saree. Her grey hair was held together with a clip. On her shoulder was a bag made of khadi. She was over sixty years old. He stared at her and in a flash he recalled her name and blurted out, 'Samskruthi.'. She seemed pleased. She smiled and said, "Thank God! You recognised me. I thought you would have forgotten me. May I come in?"

"Yes, yes. Please come. It has been ages since I last saw you. When was the last that we met? Was it forty or fifty years ago? I haven't seen you ever since you left for the US. Nice to see you. I am glad that you remembered me and took the trouble to come and meet me. Please come in ma'am," he replied warmly, inviting her and escorting her to the sofa.

"Ma'am? You don't have to be so formal," she said.

"We were students then. Now we are in our seventies. I can't help, but be formal," he replied and bombarded her with questions, "How come you remembered me after such a long time? How did you get to know that I am staying here? Are

you still based in America? Have you come here for a holiday?"

"Please wait! One question at a time! Well, how did I suddenly remember you? I haven't forgotten you, so the question of remembering you does not arise. I kept track of your whereabouts, your job, your marriage, your children, your settling down here, the demise of your wife, everything, I know everything about you," she said overcome with emotion.

Parthasarathy was flummoxed. "How do you know all these things? I haven't heard from you ever since you left for the US," he asked totally surprised.

"That's the difference between men and women. You men are opportunists. We women are different. We do not easily forget the man we love."

"What?" he asked with a confused expression on his face.

"Well! I told you, that you men are..."

"This is not fair. How am I supposed to know about your feelings? What is this talk about love? I have never heard of this before from you and now you are talking about after fifty years. What is this whole thing in this old age?" said Parthasarathy.

"Why shouldn't I love you?" she naughtily asked.

"You did not tell me about this love then. Now why are you telling me now?"

"Oh! It was too late by the time I could acknowledge my feelings. I did not understand my heart. And by the time I

understood myself, the opportunity had slipped out of my hands," laughed Samskruthi.

Parthasarathy was perplexed. "Parthu, don't look at me like a dumb child. The past can neither be changed nor can we go back into the past. So let us think about the future."

"Future? What kind of future can people of our age have? We are a stage where we are like dried leaves of a tree which may fall off any time. All that we can hope is that we should be blessed with good health for the rest of life and die a peaceful death. Other than such a desire I don't think we can have any dreams or expectations from life," replied Parthasarathy in a philosophical tone.

"You are speaking like an old fogey. OK, you are 72 years old and I am 70. Is it your body that has aged or your heart?"

Parthasarathy seemed at a loss for words. But, he very quickly gathered his thoughts and said, "The heart is a part of the body."

"I don't agree with you. The heart is ever young. It is said that the spirit and soul do not die," she replied in a provocative manner.

"I beg to differ. The heart desires different things at different stages in life. The kind of things that the heart wants at the age of ten is totally different from what it wants at the age of twenty. Our thoughts and desires keep changing as we grow older. This proves that along with our body, the heart also ages. At this age if all we want is to lead a peaceful life, then it is a sign that the heart too is tired and now wants to relax."

Sanskruthi replied, "Why is that I don't feel that way. My heart wants to possess want all those things that I did not have."

Parthasarathy looked at her as if he was unable to comprehend what she was saying. He started getting scared. 'Why is she trying to convey?,' he asked himself. He tried to calm himself by telling himself that 'She is just pulling your leg.'

"Let's forget all this! Now tell me about yourself. What does your husband do? Your children must be grown up. Are they settled in the US? When did you come to India?" Parthasarathy bombarded her with questions, both, out of curiosity and also to divert the topic they were discussing.

He walked towards the kitchen and instructed the cook, Kanthamma to brew some coffee for he had a friend visiting him and also to make some snacks to go with the beverage.

Kanthamma who was curiously watching everything from behind the kitchen door, answered, "Yes sir! I will bring them in ten minutes."

"So you have the services of a cook! It is one of the advantages of staying here. Back there in the US, you have to do everything yourself, whether you have the patience to do so or not."

"Shakuntala passed away two years ago. The children keep nagging me to stay with them in the US. I cannot stay there beyond a month. Kanthamma takes good care of me. But you haven't told me anything about yourself."

Samskruthi laughed, "Husband, children! I don't have a husband or children. So what do I say about people who don't exist?"

"Did n't you get married?" he asked, taken aback.

"No. I didn't."

"Why? Why did you remain single? Didn't you find the right person?"

"The right person slipped out of my hands," she replied laughingly. Parthasarathy was becoming anxious. He felt that was able to understand some things and was unclear about others. He tried to escape by walking towards the kitchen and find out from the cook if the snacks and coffee were ready. Kanthamma was frying pakodas. She had placed two glasses of water in a tray. She asked, all the while staring at Sanskruthi, "Shall I bring coffee after sometime?"

"Ok. Bring the coffee after sometime," he replied.

"So you think that you will offer me some pakodas and then pack me off. Nothing doing! I have come with my bag and baggage. I left them in the hotel room. I thought that once I locate your house, I will go and fetch them from the hotel."

Parathasarathy started to get nervous. 'This is a house without a female presence. Now Sanskruthi is saying that she has come to stay'. He was in a dilemma.

"Yes! I have come here to stay. Why should I stay in a hotel when I can stay with you here?"

"Yes, surely you can stay in my house. These few days that you are going to be in the city can be spent at my place. Kanthamma will take good care of you," he replied, laughing, though he was feeling uncomfortable with the very thought of her staying in his home.

"You have sanctioned only a few days! Suppose I feel like staying put here, will you allow me to do so?" she asked in Hindi, when she saw Kanthamma walk in with the tray.

Parthasarathy was a loss for words. 'Oh God! What is she saying?' .Sanskruthi has not changed even a wee bit. She has always been like this. Right from their student days. She would just drop in whenever she felt like. She would say that she was hungry and ask for something to eat. At other times she would say that she wants to lie down for half an hour and promptly flop herself on his bed. He would be terrified that someone might see her sleeping on his bed. She still continues to be her old self,' he thought. He just smiled, and continued sipping his coffee since he did not know how to react to her question.

She placed her empty cup on the centre table and asked, "Shall we go and bring my luggage from the hotel?"

"Are you serious? This place does not the facilities you are accustomed to in the US. Do you think you can adjust here?" he asked.

"It is not the house that is important for me. It is the people who matter. I have had all the comforts in the States and I got sick of those luxuries. Now I want to stay in India and even if I have to reside in a hut here, I would be very happy to do so. If it was comforts that was looking for then I need not have come so far. I have no problems in staying here. If you have any problems, then please be frank and let me know."

"No. I have problems. Anyway I will stay here and get the room ready for you. In the mean time you go and bring

your luggage from the hotel since you have the cab at your disposal."

"OK. I will be back in an hour," she replied before leaving.

Parthasarathy sat down for a few minutes with a glum expression on his face. He gathered himself and called Kanthamma and said, "Ask if Narsamma to come at once. We are having a guest after a long time.She has come from America. She will stay here for a few days. Please take care of her. Ask her what she would like to eat. Find out if she prefers spicy or bland kind of food. And start preparations for dinner." Then he gave due instructions to the maid to get the guest room ready for Sanskruthi.

He came and sat down on the sofa. He was tensed, worried and confused. He thought, 'I had prepared a routine for myself and life was going on smoothly. Now suddenly she has arrived. She has always been a different kind of a person. She still continues to behave as she used to when she was student and now she is in her seventies and she has not changed. She was an enigma then and still continues to be so.'

'Sanskruhti,' A rare name. An uncommon name. Her name evoked curiosity among all in their college days. She was different from others, just like her name that so rare and different. She had joined the Andhra University to pursue post-graduation in English. She had studied till her bachelor's degree in Kolkota's Shantiniketan. Her father was a manager in a British run oil company. They had come to Vizag due her father's transfer. They lived in a huge bungalow in Uplands.

She had a retinue of servants, butlers and attendants at home.Though her father worked for a British company, he was a very traditional person who loved and followed Indian culture. He would not drink even a cup of coffee without completing the daily pujas and reciting the Gayatri Mantra. He had raised his daughter in a very traditional manner. Sanskruthi, true to her name, was an epitome of Indian culture. She was blessed with healthy skin, and was always clad in handloom sarees with the blouses matching with colour of her sari borders. She had a long braid. She used always carried shoulder bag made of khadi. Though she came from a traditional background, she spoke fluent English. She was always the centre of attraction because she was so different from other girls in the university. She used to be found reading some book or the other. I was from the Physics department. And she was from the liberal Arts. There was no way that we could meet. I heard all the boys talking about her. I wanted to meet her. I saw her for the first time in the library, sitting and reading a book. I was struck by her beauty. She possessed an electrifying personality. I felt an inexplicable feeling. Now I understood why people were impressed by her. Like a magnet I was drawn to the English department or the library, just all others.

My interest in literature drew us close to each other. Thanks to the shared interest in books, we became good friends within two months. The two years at the university brought us even closer.

She would interact freely, but she knew where to draw the line. She inspired fear and respect and she carried herself so well that no one could never think or talk of her in a

degrading manner. Her friendship did not recognise any gender barriers. She would freely come to the hostel room, talk for hours together, suggest that they go to the beach or to the movies. Though she was friendly, her behaviour did not allow anyone to cross the limits of decency.

For a person like me hailing from a middle class family, this friendship was something that was like a blessing but I did not have any other expectations from her. There was nothing else other than a sense of awe and adoration in my heart. I went on to complete my doctorate and was appointed as a professor in the university. I married a girl of modest means and lead a fairly contented life. Sanskruthi did not figure in my life as anything more a good friend.

Now now suddenly, afterso many decades she had come unannounced.

⁂

"Sanskruthi, will you please spell out clearly as to what is it that you want from me? I am not able to understand."

It has been ten days since she came to my home. She had made herself at home and it seemed as if she had been here for years. She never spoke of her leaving. I was not sure how long she intended to stay or if she any intentions of leaving in the first place. On one hand I did not know how to broach this subject and on the other I was terribly worried about what the society would say about her and me.Finally, one day I mustered up the courage to ask her and when did so she looked surprised.

"What do you think I am expecting from you?" she counter questioned.

"I don't know. That is precisely why I am asking you," he replied, slightly annoyed.

"Whatever we have been doing for the past one week is all I want. I desire nothing more than that," she calmly replied while looking at him.

Parthasarathy looked as if he did not understand anything.

"Look Parthu. Everyday early morning I am accompanying you on your morning walks. We come and have coffee in the verandah while reading the newspaper and discussing the news. We have our breakfast together. We play chess. While playing chess we start discussing or debating some issue. We continue our discussions at the dining table. Then afternoon siesta. Then our evening routine begins. I have joined your senior citizens group. We come and watch TV for sometime and later we have our dinner. After dinner we come and sit in this verandah and listen to the melodies of M. S. Subbulakshmi, Balamurali Krishna and old Hindi songs. While enjoying the retro music we recall the bygone days and the memories associated with the past. Then we both pick up a book each and read. We are spending our days sharing our ideas and opinions like good friends. That is all we are doing and that is all I expect from you. Parthu, I have longed for a person who would think like I do. Someone compatible. A heart that appreciates good poetry. Someone who has a sense of humour. Someone who is intelligent enough to retort appropriately. Someone who is smart enough to give a proper repartee. A person of my wavelength. I have been starved of the right company. You said several times that I should have got married. I did not find the person who could understand me. It is then I realised your value. I realised what

I had allowed to slip out of my hands. Father died pining to see me married. I tried to locate and found that you already had your family by then.I felt sorry for myself for having let you go due to my apathy. I had my job, books, music, friends, colleagues and I went globe-trotting. But I could not find the person I wanted. I retired ten years ago. I no longer felt like staying in the States. Again I tried to find out about you. I came to know that you had lost your wife and are staying alone. Now you must have realised how painful loneliness can be. I tried to find that companionship in you.I thought, 'better late than never! That's all I want. Yeah! That's all," she replied emotionally.

"Sorry! I understand the vacuum in your life. But this is India. How much ever westernized we might be, people here have not moved beyond the level of gossiping when they see together a man and a woman who are not married to each other, even though they might be septuagenarians. Have you observed how curiously the milkman, paper boy, the washer man has been watching us? Even the neighbours watch us curiously every time when we go out for our walks. If my children come to know, they are sure to feel embarrassed."

"Look Parthu, I am not bothered about what the society says about anyone. You enlighten your children about our friendship. If you feel that you cannot, then I will talk to them."

"You may not be concerned about therest of the world. But the society certainly is bothered about you."

"Actually it seems that my presence here is making you uncomfortable. You seem to beating around the bush, since

etiquette does not allow you to directly to ask me leave," she said, in a pained tone. Parthasarathy could not bring himself to look into her eyes.

"Don't say that. You must have been through excruciating loneliness. That must have driven you to take such a decision. But these kinds of things are still not socially acceptable in our country. I am worried that we both might become a laughing stock. Anyway, let's see. I need to mentally prepare myself. And for that I shall need some time. Please try to understand."

"That's OK. You look so petrified as if I have asked you to marry me or demanded a share of your property," she replied laughingbreezily.

* * *

"Daddy, brother and I have read your e-mail. Sanskruthi aunty has also explained in detail. In fact, brother and I are very thrilled," said Sharanya, sounding very excited.

"Thanks dear. I was terrified that you may think that I am going astray in this old age.What did Sharat say?" asked Parthasarathy anxiously. Sharat was listening to this conversation between his father and sister over the conference phone said, "Daddy, we know that you have been very lonely and you are extremely lucky to find a companion in this age. We have no problems with this decision. We are broad-minded people. Aunty has explained the whole thing in such a wonderful way. Her e-mail shows that she is a very cultured, warm hearted, noble and sensible. We feel extremely blessed that you have found a friend like her."

"But Sharath, how many people will truly understand our friendship?"

"Dad, I don't think you should bother about others. Don't let go of a friend who shares your values, understandings your feelings, and someone with whom you can share thoughts. And Dad, if the opinion of the world still matters to you, then we suggest that you and Samskruthi get married. We will be happy for both of you," said Sharanya.

"No. No. We have decided against marriage. Once you are married, then a whole lot of issues like rights, responsibilities...will crop up. And at this stage in life we do not all those things."

"As you wish Dad. So now you can rest assured and whole heartedly let her live with you in our house. We will come to see you both in this vacation," said Parthasarathy's children, before disconnecting the call. Parthasarathy placed the receiver on the cradle and turned around to find Kanthamma and Narsamma standing together, both eager to say something. "Yes Kanthamma, is there anything that you want"? he asked. Kanthamma stood there, looking hesitant.

"Sir! If you don't mind can we say something? I have been working for you for the past one and half years and Narsasamma has been working for past fifteen years. So we take the liberty to say something," said Kanthamma, wondering whether to proceed further. 'God, hope they won't say that they will quit if Sanskruthi is allowed to stay in this house,' he thought.

"Yes. Please go ahead."

"Sir, since we stay here, we get to know what is going on and we understand somethings. Ever since Sanskruthi madam has come we have observed her and we have realised that she is a wonderful human being. We understood that she came with the desire to stay here, but you are not comfortable with that idea, because you are worried that the society may not accept this. Sir, we feel that you should just not bother about the world outside. When your children have no objection to her staying here, then the society should be of no concern. Madam's presence has made the home lively. Please don't let go of a person who has come to offer her companionship."

"OK. Let's see. I will think over it," he said, before disappearing into his bedroom.

* * *

The next day, early morning, Kanthamma came rushing and in a panic-sricken voice said, "Sir, madam is not in her room. Her luggage is missing. I found this letter. I went to give her a cup of coffee and this is what I found." Parthasarathy turned pale. He took the letter from Kanthamma's hand.

"Parthasarthy, I am leaving. Yesterday I realised that I committed a blunder by coming here. You want to be known as a faithful husband as Lord Rama was. I never asked to take your wife's place. All I asked was for companionship. And you were wracked by countless doubts, questions, thoughts and mind boggling dilemmas. You lack the kind of concern that Kanthamma and Narsamma have demonstrated. You lacked the broad-mindedness that your children possess. I expected you to show the relief that you, I thought should have felt, when your children and Kanthamma and Narsamma

readily accepted me. I desired to see the happiness that there should have been there since we had crossed all hurdles. But you spent the entire night locked up in your room, thinking and mulling, over and over again. It is then that I felt 'why did I come such a long way for this timid and diffidentperson'?

I felt hurt that my assessment of your broad-mindedness had been completely wrong. If I continue to live in your house, then you will probably be never at peace because you will forever be bothering about what the world is talking about us. How can I feel comfortable and extend my friendship in such an environment? You are comfortable with your narrow mindedness and so it be! You have proved yourself to be like anyone else, 'a common man'. Thanks for a fortnight of your hospitality. Bye. Sanskruthi."

Parthasarathy did not feel as sad or hurtas he should have felt. He felt that he had escaped from some danger.

*(*Sagatu Manishi - *Selected for Ugadi story competition held by Andhra Bhoomi Daily, 15-5-2008)*

14. Lost Lives

"Aunty, have you seen that someone has moved intosecond floor, flat no: 202?" said my neighbour Roshni. "Who is it? When did they move in? I did not see them," I replied.

"You can see her. She is standing there," said Roshni. I moved closer to the railing and looked down with curiosity. Our residential complex was constructed in a circular shape, like a well, so that where ever one stands, one can see all the apartments. I was watching from the fourth floor. I found a girl standing at the entrance of flat no: 202. She was clad in a salwar kameez, wheatish complexioned, short and thin. Roshni said, "Aunty, I saw met her in the lift.She does not appear to be a family type of a girl."

Roshni's husband joined us and he said, "Yes aunty. She is not a straight girl." Men can easily asses these kinds of things. It comes very naturally to them.

"What makes you think so? Is she living alone? What about her husband and family?" I asked.

"I have no idea, aunty. She looks like a Muslim. But she told someone that she is a Gujarati, and to someone else she

said that she is a Marwadi," replied Roshni.

"Yesterday, after midnight night two men came looking for flat no: 202. The watchman asked the strangers as to who they were and they said that they had to go to that flat. These men went to that house and left at five in the morning. The watchman told me all this," said Roshni's husband.

"I am not even aware of her moving in. When did she move in? Did she bring any household goods?" I asked.

"I don't know either. But she came with a few cartoons in a rickshaw. It will be better if you call her and enquire," suggested Roshni.

People in my residential complex look up to me for advice. Right since I moved into this complex, I have been involved in the welfare of the residents as the President, Secretary and Treasurer. I set up a Ladies Club, organised games, community celebrations like Ganesh festivals etc. I was approached for finding solutions to common problems like the corridors not being swept, or if there no water supply and many such other miscellaneous issues that are usually faced by apartment dwellers.

I amone of the few residents of my housing complex who takes interest in all matters pertaining to the building. Hence the ladies of our complex generally approach me if they have any problem. So I clapped my hands and when the girl looked up, the signalled her to come up.

"You have newly moved in? Where are you from?" I gently asked her in Hindi. It's not fair to be rude to someone who you hardly know! She looked pale and dull. She must be hardly twenty years old. She was wearing a black beads chain

around her neck. She had henna designs on her palms.

"Yes. Earlier we used to stay in the old city. I recently moved in here," she replied.

"What does your husband do?"

She looked at me and replied, "We have a dry fruits shop in the old city."

I asked her the name of the shop and also the address. She mentioned some name.

"What is your name? Yeah! You told me that your name is Shalini. Look, those who move in here, should pay in advance one month's maintenance charges. When your husband comes, ask him to meet the President and Secretary of this complex and pay the money. The association should be informed of people who move in here. So ask your husband to go and meet them," I aid.

"Ok."

"Are you newly married?" Where did you get married? I asked, looking at the henna on her palms and glass bangles on her wrists.

"I am from Gujarat. I got married there."

"You seem to be alone. Where are your in-laws?" I enquired.

"My in-laws will come later."

"The watch man informed that last night two men came to your place. We do not allow strangers to come at all hours. Who were they?"

Her expression changed. She faltered and replied, "My paternal uncles."

"The watch man is instructed not to open the gates for strangers who come at in at odd hours. So inform your relatives." She did not seem to like this rule. I continued, "Since tomorrow is Sunday, ask your husband to meet the secretary and pay the amount."

I stopped at that and came away. I will have find out if she whatever she has said is true or not, and then think about what has to be done later.

"Aunty, did you observe that she looks like a Muslim. She is wearing a bindi, but her language does not seem to be like a Gujarati's," said Roshni.

"She said that they used to stay in old city, so maybe she has learnt to speak Hindi like it is spoken there. Any way we will wait and watch for a few days. Things will start falling in place," I said.

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The following night, around 1 AM, two men tried to enter the building. When the watchman did not allow them to inside, they got into an altercation with him, shoved him aside and made their way into that flat and came out in the early hours of the day. The next day the watchman narrated the entire thing to the Secretary. She just ignored the rule that her husband was to meet the Secretary and also pay one month's the maintenance charges in advance. The supervisor was sent to enquire and she told him very nonchalantly that her husband was out of town and she would pay the necessary amount after his arrival. That night, the girl was seen leaving

the housing complex at around 8 O'clock, gaudily dressed in shiny, jazzy clothes, wearing bright lipstick, heavily perfumed and wearing jasmines in her hair. She came back around midnight accompanied by men. When the watchman stopped her, she outright told him that it is her home and she has the right to bring her people home at any time and he has no right to stop her. The lady residents of the apartments in the second floor came to me to discuss this issue. One of them said, "Aunty, she does not have a husband. All kinds of shady men frequent her flat every night. Last night my husband and I came went to watch a second show movie and on our return we found her arguing with the watchman." Another lady added, "She sleeps the entire day and leaves her home around 8 in the night, gaudily dressed and the watchman told us that she comes back after midnight, accompanied by men." Our housing complex consists of sixty apartments. People like me whogo to sleep early do not know of the late night happenings. But businessmen and clubgoers who come late in the night are in the know of such things.

I wanted to talk to the watchman to get a better picture of the whole issue. The watchman launched a blistering attack against her. He said, "She is not married and so the question of having a husband is ruled out. She is running a business here. The President and the Secretary have been informed, but to no avail. If you people do not take any action, what can I do as the watchman? When we enquire about her husband, she says he is travelling. She refers to all the strangers who come to her house as 'uncles'. What can I do?"

"Aunty, she is at home. Let's go and talk to her," said the women. Four to five of us went to her place and knocked on

her door. She was sleeping. She took sometime to come and open the door. She looked at us with irritation. We peeped into her bedroom. There was a beautiful king-sized bed covered with a silk bed spread. There was an expensive silk blanket. There were two cane chairs beside the bedroom. There were few utensils in the kitchen. She tried to smile, but on seeing that all of us appeared serious, she just said, "Yes?"

"It has been over a week since you moved in. You have not paid the advance. You have not introduced your husband either. The watchman is saying that all men are frequenting your place," I said, in a stern voice.

"My husband is travelling. I will pay after he returns," she replied casually.

"Why do all kinds of men frequent your home at night, that too in absence of your husband?" asked a lady.

"Don't your relatives come to your place?" she asked haughtily.

"Relatives do come to our place. But we do not have unknown men coming over. You are confusing us all the time. One day you say that you are a Gujarati, another time you say that you are a Marwadi. Are you really married? Please show us your wedding album," said Meena, an occupant of the second floor.

"The photos are not here. They are at my in-law's place," she replied, faltering.

"Don't you have a single picture with you? You are lying. Tell us the truth. Did you elope with someone? Tell us the

name of the person who brought you to this flat. We will talk to them," I said in a rather demanding tone. I felt that this girl had either eloped with someone or she was somebody's mistress. We were thinking that if she is someone's concubine, then only that person should be visiting her and not all and sundry.

She said, "My husband's friends fixed this house. I don't know who they are."

"Look, if you don't pay the money in the next two days, we will be forced to disconnect electricity and water supply to your flat. And according to our rules, if you do not introduce your husband to the Secretary, you will not be allowed to stay here. We will complain to the owner and have the flat vacated. We have instructed the watchman not to allow any strangers into the complex," I said rather harshly. We decided to wait for two days and then if necessary inform the owner of the apartment.

Despite our warning, she left at8 O' clock, gaudily dressed and came back at 5 in the morning, accompanied by a girl. Two days later, the supervisor was sent to enquire about the money and her husband. She told him the same old story and sent him away. In these two days the girls used to leave home in the evening and come back past midnight. Two days later the electricity and water supply was snapped.She did not come and request for extension of grace time like any normal, straight kind of person. She started carrying two buckets of water from the ground floor. She used to rarely stay at home during the nights. Hence disconnection of electricity did not cause any kind of inconvenience to her. Our doubts seem be coming true since neither she nor any

one representing her came to request for some kind of relief. We realised that she was not the 'family kind' of a girl and that somebody had parked her here.How could such things be tolerated in places where decent families reside? We called for a meeting and the owner was informed of the seedy life of his tenants. The owner said that he was not aware of who exactly were his tenants and that he had let out the house to someone who had called him over the phone and claimed to be related to an MLA. The owner also said that it was a broker who had negotiated the whole thing. We gave the house owner a piece of our mind. We told him that he is supposed to check the credentials of the people before letting out his apartment and that we will not turn a blind eye to such nefarious activities in our premises. The owner was advised to have the flat vacated immediately. The owner in turn requested the Association to take appropriate action on his behalf.

While we were thinking of ways to have the flat vacated, the girls came that night accompanied by two ruffians, who were probably Muslims. When the watchman refused to allow them in, the men threaten to beat him up and forcibly made their way into the flat. The watchman bolted the door from outside and informed the Secretary. The Secretary told the watchman that 'we might get into trouble if we lock them up, since the men seem to be goonsand if we inform the police, the girl might say that they are her relatives and we have no proof to prove it otherwise. So let them go for today.'

The next evening after the girls went out we had a lock put over the existing one.They came early in the morning at around 5 O'clock and found that we had locked her door. She got into an argument with the watchman. She then came

down to look for a stone to break the lock. She found a stone and tried to break the lock, when the watchman stopped her and managed to put a lock belonging to the Association. He warned the girls that they will get into trouble if they break the lock belonging to the association and that they should wait till daybreak and get in touch with the association for any kind of solution. The girls went and sat on the terrace. I woke up at 6 O' clock and the watchman immediately came and narrated the entire story.

Accompanied by few ladies of my complex, I sent the watchman to ask the girls to come down. They came and immediately Shalini angrily asked, "Why did you put a lock over my lock?"

"Why shouldn't we? But first let me tell you that you cannot run a brothel here and if you do not make timely payments, the Association has the right to do what we have done," I replied harshly because I was irritated by her audacity.

"Look! We are not going to remain silent if you try to break our lock. We will call the police and have you thrown behind the bars. Just pay the money that is due and quietly vacate the house. We have informed the owner and he said that he was not aware of what kind of people you are and that he has nothing to do with you all and also we can go ahead and throw you out, if you don't leave on your own." The girl was taken aback with my onslaught.

The other girl got scared and said, "Aunty, if you unlock the door I will take my luggage and leave. This is her home. I am just visiting her."

"We are not concerned with all that. We will open the

door only after the payment is made. Pay the dues and immediately vacate the flat," I said firmly. I continued in Hindi, "We cannot tolerate your coming and going at odd hours and entertaining all kinds of men."

The new girl said, "They are our uncles," Shalini cut her short and said, "Shut up! They are not going to not going to believe us." The second girl started to cry. "You forced me to come and stay with you. Now my clothes and other things are locked inside. What shall I do now?" she said accusingly. Shalini pleaded, "Please give me some more time. I will by day after tomorrow."

"Then we will open the lock the day after tomorrow. You will vacate immediately after we open the lock. We will talk only after you make the payment." We did not argue any more since everybody tends to be busy in the mornings. I saw the girls sitting on the stairs of the second floor and occasionally wiping their tears.

A couple of hours later, after finishing my household chores, I came out to find the girls still sitting on the stairs. I felt sorry for them. 'Where will they go if we ask them to leave immediately? Their clothes and other pieces of luggage are locked inside. Poor girls,' I thought. I could not stop myself from going down to the second floor. They looked at me with hope. Shalini tried to say something. I said, "Look! You seem to be hardly twenty years old. Why are you into this kind of business? Don't you think it is shameful to be doing what you are doing?"

The girl glared at me. She said angrily, "So what do you think I should be doing? How will I survive?"

"Don't you have a family? Mother, father, relatives? Did they get you married?" The writer in me was eager to know.

The girl replied sullenly, "I have a family. My parents have too many kids, so they just abandoned me."

"How could they abandon a girlchild?"

"We are eight kids. Father is no more. Mother could not feed so many mouths. Our neighbour, Abdul Bhai promised to find a job for me in Mumbai. My mother trusted him and sent me to Mumbai along with him. That scoundrel sold me to someone for two thousand rupees."

"You are a Muslim. But you lied to us that you are a Hindu and a Gujarathi"

She hung her head. "It is difficult for Muslims to find rented accommodation."

"So how did you come here from Mumbai?" I asked.

"It's no use talking all this. Please unlock the door. I will pay tomorrow," she requested, when she realised that I was feeling sorry for her.

"I will discuss with the Secretary and let you know later. First tell me how did you come here from Mumbai?"

"The aunty who bought me taught dance to me and a couple of other girls and sent us to Bengaluru to perform cabaret dances in night clubs. After few months, a police party raided the club where we were performing and arrested all of us and threw us into the prison. Since there was no one to bail us out, they beat us and finally released us. There I met a fellow who asked me to accompany him to Hyderabad and stay with him. He seemed to be a rich fellow. He said that he

was a Marwadi. He rented a room in the old city and kept me there for six months. He used to visit me whenever he felt like. After losing interest in me, he stopped coming. He referred me to some other men. I have to survive and for that I need money. Did I have any option?" she said, daring me to answer her.

"Didn't you go to school?" I asked.

She laughed. I could detect the helplessness in her laughter.

"School? We could not afford two square meals a day. Forget about schooling. I used to go to school when my father was alive. I studied upto 5th standard. After my father passed away, my mother pulled me out of school and sent me to work."

"So how did you come here? How will you pay three thousand rupees as rent and an additional amount of seven hundred as maintenance? Do you earn enough for all this expenditure? You have come to stay here. What made you think people here would allow you to continue with your profession?"

"Some broker fellow brought me here. He said that men like to visit prostitutes who live in such decent localities; because they feel that they are visiting women who are the 'family types.' I was told that they get a kick out of visiting women who live in decent homes which have big spacious beds and look like straight homes. He said that he will supply customers and I should pay some amount every month. He negotiated with the owner and paid the advance, and brought me here."

"Then why didn't you ask the same person to pay the maintenance amount. You too are earning. You could have paid it yourself," I said.

"I earn peanuts. Bastards do not pay more than a hundred or two," she said venomously.

I realised that this girl had seen the worst in the past couple of years. She must have been sixteen when she was forced into flesh trade, just to keep her body and soul together. I felt extremely sorry for her. She was a girl who despite having a family, was forced to sell her body for survival. This is the result of poverty. Poverty drives even the parents to dump their children or put them up for sale. These kinds of incidents are reported everyday. There must bemany more such incidents that go unreported. Especially in Muslim families, where men have multiple wives and father several children, then sell the children, or get them married off to elderly Arab men and send them away. Newspapers regularly report these kinds of incidents. Who will come to the rescue of such girls? The government should step in at such times. Such victims are kept in social welfare homes where they do not get enough support or even proper nutrition. They tend to escape from such homes and finally end up in such professions. Where else will they end up? I went and spoke with the Secretary and asked if we could unlock the door and allow her to at least take her clothes.

"If we show pity on her she will just not pay up. We disconnected water and electricity supply to her flat and yet it made no difference to her. Now that it is confirmed that she is into flesh trade we cannot allow her to stay. If we do so out of sympathy, people will find definitely find fault with

us. If we are not strict with her she will not pay the due amount," the Secretary said. That is true! One has to follow the rules and regulations. The two girls sat till ten O'clock, hoping that we would take pity on them and unlock their door. They left once they realised that no such thing was going to happen.

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A few days after she left, men started coming at night asking for her. The watch man used to tell them that she has vacated the flat. Gradually the men stopped coming.She came a fortnight later, accompanied by two young men. She cleared the dues, collected her belongings and left. Before she left, I could not stop myself from asking her as to where she was going. She looked at me with unconcealed disdain and said, "Old city. I am not going to place where decent people like you do not reside." I could detect her pain in her sarcastic reply.

*(*Elanti Ammayilendaro - *'Priyadutta' Monthly, 16.2.2002)*

15. The Shifting Times

Kalyani opened the door on hearing the door bell ring.She found a young girl, clad in jeans and a white colour kurti, bobbed hair, and with a huge bag slung across her shoulder. She seemed to be hail from a decent and well-educated family. She was bestowed with an intelligent face, big expressive eyes. 'Fairly good looking', thought Kalyani while wearing a question on her face.

"Are you Kalyani? May I come in?" asked the girl.

"Who are you? And what do you want," Kalyani asked cordially.

"My name is Shruti. I am Sankalp's colleague. But I am his junior."

"Oh! You are my son's colleague. Please come in," said Kalyani inviting the visitor. She gently led Shruti to the sofa in the drawing room and made her feel comfortable.

Kalyani too sat across and said, "OK! So Sankalp and you are colleagues. I do not recall Sankalp ever mentioning you. Is he still in the office? Why have you come alone?"

Shruti averted her eyes and said, "I came alone so that I could talk to you."

Kalyani was surprised. "Did Sankalp do something wrong," she asked herself, before she gathered herself and asked, "What do you want to talk about Sankalp? Tell me.?"

"Aunty, Sankalp and I were in love." Even before Shruti could continue, Kalyani interrupted and asked, "You said 'were in love'. Does that mean that you are no longer in love"?

Shruti faltered. "It's not that. We were in love and we wanted to get married. Now Sankalp has backed out. You kindly advise him. We have moved closely with each for about six to seven months."

"So within six months it was curtains down to your love affair," said Kalyani, getting a fair picture of the whole issue.

"Aunty, you are a highly educated person, working as a professor. You should demand an explanation from Sankalp. I was hoping that as a woman, you would understand me and support me," said Shruti, earnestly.

"Look! I will not ask if you took me into confidence before getting involved with my son, because I know that nobody seeks permission from their elders before falling in love. But why did Sankalp refuse to marry you? Did he ever promise to marry you?" asked Kalyani, questioning her like a lawyer.

"Aunty, nobody ever first asks 'will you marry me?' and then fall in love. It is only after getting to know the person, and if we like that person, then we talk of marriage," countered Shruti, sounding no less a lawyer than Kalyani.

"So he said that he would marry you after knowing you for sometime?"

"It was a joint decision."

"When did you both take this decision? And why did you decide so?"

"This decision was taken two months ago. We decided to marry because we thought that we had understood each other," said Shruti boldly.

"Fine! Now why is he refusing to marry you? Did he spell out the reasons?"

"He did not say so. He said that 'our marriage is not likely to work out. Let's say good bye to each other and part like good friends.' He said all this after we both got close to each other," said Shruti angrily.

"If he has said so, then both of you must be aware of the reasons. What do you think I can do about all this?" said Kalyani, looking straight into Shruti's face.

"You are a mother. I thought that you will be drive home the point to Sankalp that it is not the right thing to move closely with a girl and then refuse to marry her. As an educated mother, I hope you understand me and set things right," said Shruti, her eyes mirroring anger and humiliation.

"Shruti, there was something that I said I would not ask. But now I am left with no choice but to ask if you people sought my permission before falling in love with each other. Now don't you think you are expecting a bit too much if you think I should admonish and counsel my son as per your desire? Do you think my son will listen to me? Is the present day generation in any mood to listen to their elders? If you were in my son's shoes, do you think you would heed your

mother's advice? If only you youngsters had any respect for your elders, you all would not do what you have done," said Kalyani.

Shruti tried to say something, but Kalyani stopped her and continued, "See I do not know what Sankalp said and what went wrong between you both. You have given your version. Now I have to listen to his side of the story too. I will ask Sankalp and after listening to him... by the way, was your love affair confined only to movies, restaurants and parks or did you people go much further? You know what I am hinting at?"

Shruti could not look into Kalyani's eyes. She replied looking at the floor, "We became very intimate, but not as much as you are hinting at. But after getting so intimate with a boy, and if the girl gets dumped, then you know what kind of a future awaits her."

"Thank God for you have not lost sight of certain limits. Today's youth feels invincible. But our society has not changed as much as you expected. At least as far as the issue of marriage is concerned, things have not changed much. The elders are of no concern to you when you fall in love. But when you get into trouble, then suddenly you remember the elders and expect them to intervene and sort out the mess. You youngsters create the mess and make the elders responsible for the same. This is precisely what you are doing now," said Kalyani.

"I am not holding you responsible for anything. As a mother you can at least support me. Is it too much to ask?" demanded Shruti.

"Shruti, you are very intelligent and expressive. You would have used all these talents to set things right. Anyway, since you brought all this to my notice, I will talk to Sankalp and then get back to you,but in the meantime I would like to know something about your family and your biodata. Please send them to my email address," Kalyani said and wrote out her email id on a piece of paper and handed over to Shruti.

"Thanks Aunty, I hope to hear good news from you," said Shruti and walked out. Kalyani sat down and kept staring outside long after Shruti had left.

* * *

"Oh! So she came to you, is it? To complain against me, I guess," said Sankalp, his voice expressing anger and sarcasm.

"What exactly is going on? What is the problem between you both? You never told me anything about this whole thing. You could have at least informed us before you had decided to get married," said Kalyani, sounding hurt.

Sankalp averted his eyes, took a sip of water and said apologetically, "I wanted to inform you. I wanted to introduce her to you after we both would have felt sure about going ahead with marriage. But in the meantime all this happened..."

"What happened in the mean time? Why did you change your mind? Do you think it is ethically right on your part to fool around with a girl and when it is time to get married you promptly change your mind?" asked Kalyani, unable to conceal her disapproval coming through her voice.

"Cool down Mamma. I know that you are a feminist. Please keep aside all your ideals aside for the time being, and let us converse like a mother and son.

"Ok. Now tell me. I believe that you refused to marry her. Why did you refuse? As your mother do I have a right to know the reason? If you think so, then tell me the reason."

"Mamma, I felt that if I marry her, my life would become difficult. As I got to know her, I felt that our opinions clashed. If there is no compatibility before marriage, then you can imagine life after marriage. I am feeling very relieved, since I took the right decision before marriage."

"You have known each other for aboutseven to eight months. You should have been more discerning before thinking of marriage."

"How is it possible mamma? How can anyone judge anyone's character right at the first meeting? One begins with being friends. It's only later that this friendship turns into love that we start thinking of marriage. We realise a person character only after spending some time getting to know them, isn't it?" asked Sankalp.

"You are right. But what is it that you do did not like about her?"

Sankalp did not reply. He continued eating.

"Please tell me. I can answer her only if I know the truth."

"You don't owe her any explanation. It is I who has to answer her. You shrug it off by saying that it is between you and Sankalp," said Sankalp to his rather casually.

"Do you think that it is right on my part to dismiss her so arrogantly. Please remember that I am a mother of a girl. That kind of an attitude does not behove an educated woman like me. Do you think that we can easily shrug off if your

sister is in the same situation? Don't you think that we will spare no effort to make things work out? That girl personally came to our home to request me for help. I cannot dismiss the whole thing without being sure that you are not fault. I am your mother. How can I ignore something that concerns my son?" said Kalyani persistently.

"Mamma, you are very sensitive. Look Mamma, that girl and I are not compatible. Please remember that your son is not the kind of person who gets into casual flings. And that is because of the right values you have instilled in me. Please trust your upbringing and you can be sure that I have not wronged that girl. The only reason I don't to marry her is because of her nature and attitude."

"Give me some instances. If I am convinced, then I will stand by you."

"Mamma, there are some things that we have to experience ourselves to understand someone. Some instances might seem very trivial to others. But it might become irritants in a relationship.I will give a few instances to show why I no longer like her. Do you know why she wants to marry me? She is enamoured by my job, money, property, and status. Earlier I thought that she was genuinely in love with me. So I told all about myself, our family, our occupations, and I also showed her our house."

"You showed her our house? When did you bring her home?" asked Kalyani, taken aback.

"I brought her home when you all had gone to Vizag to visit grandfather who was unwell then," he replied while avoiding his mother's eyes.

Kalyani stared at her son and said, "Ok, continue."

"She fell in love with our house, status, cars and property and she started exerting pressure on me to get married at theearliest. 'My people are not happy with our moving closely with each other. They want to get married immediately,' she started saying to keep up the pressure. One day she forced me to accompany her to her house and made her father rake up the issue of marriage. I was pushed into an uncomfortable situation. Her father is a small time employee. mother is a school teacher. They are three girls. Only the eldest one is married. Another girl is still studying. Shruti had taken a loan to pursue her engineering degree. I told her right in the beginning that marriage is not on my priority list because the company will be sending me to the US. I am not sure how long I will be expected to stay in the US. Maybe I will have to stay for a year or two. I cannot think of marriage till I get some kind of clarity on these issues. Since then she started feeling that I might slip out of her grip. So she started talking of getting engaged. She started saying, 'my parents will approach your parents and finalise everything.' She is very greedy too. I have seen her greed on many occasions. I stared losing respect for her." Kalyani could clearly see in Sankalp's words, the strong dislike that Shruti had fostered in him.

"Can you be specific?" said Kalyani.

"Do you know Mamma how much she has made me spend on her in these past six months? She would say, 'A person like you dine only in five-star hotels.' She would remark that the birthday gift I gave her does not behove my status. 'Let's see what you will gift on Valentine's Day. I certainly will not be happy if you gift something as insignificant as this

one.' One day she took my wallet and saw my credit cards and said, 'So many cards! Give me one card and I will leave no balance in your bank account.' Other times she would ask, 'Everyone in your family is well placed. Is this the only bungalow you own or do you have some more property?Have you purchased any property? By the time we get married, I expect you to buy a big apartment, so that I can decorate it as per my taste. And I also want a car. So many expectations! She would openly ask for gifts. She was very inquisitive about our property matters. All these things started irritating me. Her greed put me off. I felt that she was a woman of cheap mentality. If she can be so demanding before marriage, I shudder to think about the situation after marriage. I no longer have any good opinion of her.Her father too only talks about my salary, our bungalow, our property..."

"As a father the girl, he would naturally be interested in your financial stability," said Kalyani.

"Mamma, I know. But there are discrete ways to get to know about such things. It is not proper to ask right on someone's face all such things. I somehow did not like their behaviour. They do not fit into our league."

"You mean, as far as status and wealth is concerned?" asked Kalyani.

"No. That is not the issue. There is nothing wrong in not being rich or influential. One can be poor in terms of money, but one should not be bankrupt as far as self-respect is concerned. That is something that is in short supply in that family," said Sankalp in a disgusted tone.

"She comes from a financially weak background. So it is natural for her try and find out if she will have a comfortable

life atleast after she gets married," said Kalyani, trying to look at the issue from all angles.

"Mamma, please do not try to stand up for her.You hardly know her. It is only when you move closely with someone, you will get to know their true nature. You know what? She would start sulking if I talk to anyone in the office-jealousy."

"That's what is bothering me now. She said that you both were very close to each other and very intimately involved too. After all this, is it fair to turn away from the relationship? This is what is worrying me."

"You are so naive. How could you trust her so easily? There was nothing as intimate as she made it to be. We went out to movies and restaurants. But we never crossed the limits. Like good friends we both got photographed together. Infact she would try to get physically close to me. She would rest her head on my shoulder while I used to drive the car, she would insist on holding my hand in the park, she used to feed with a spoon whenever we went out for dinners, and once in the darkness of the cinema hall, she kissed me on my cheek. That's all. She came and made it seem as if the limits of decency were crossed. Please trust Mamma," said Sankalp.

"I just cannot understand your friendships, love affairs, outings, courting and all such stuff. And one fine day, you youngsters say that you are no longer interested in each other. I belong to the generation that believes in arranged marriages, and considers the relationship between the spouses as one that connot not be easily broken. I cannot understand these love affairs, outings, this physical intimacy and then lack of understanding and compatibility, going back on the relation,

allegations, seeking revenge. All this is beyond my comprehension. Anyway, what shall we do about that poor girl?"

"Despite my telling you all these things, why are you still sympathetic towards her? I will talk to her. You just keep out of this,"said Sankalp brushing it off.

* * *

Saradhi sighed after listening to his wife, Kalyani's narration. He looked at her and asked, "Ok. What do you think we should do now?"

"That is what I am thinking about."

"Since that girl personally came to you, I think you too should visit their house and convey Sankalp's opinion to her parents. We need feel guilty because we are not at fault. Just go and cordially convey the message," suggested Saradhi.

* * *

"Shruti, I will visit your house on Saturday to meet your family members."

"Yes aunty. I will ask my family members to be present," Sruti said, hardly able to control the excitement in her voice. She went home and happily conveyed the news to her parents.

* * *

"Shruti, I spoke to my son. After speaking to him, I realised that I marriage can be performed on the basis of recommendations, but I cannot succeed in making you both live as man and wife, in the true sense of the world. I am sorry for not being to help you in anyway."

Shruti was shocked. She became pale. "What did Sankalp say?" in a harsh voice.

"Nothing specific." She did know how to precisely spell out what her son had told her. She continued, "Look Shruti, there is no point in forcing him to marry you when he is not willing to. You can never be happy in such a marriage. You will be happy when you marry a person who likes you."

"I became close to him because we both liked each other. After all that, and the rejection, I thought that you as an elder will convince him," she replied angrily.

"Madam, we are the girl's family. Why is the boy backing out now? You will have to tell us the reason because in no way is my daughter inferior to than your son," asked Shruti's father, rather harshly.

"Look, if this was an arranged proposal, then you would have had the right to question me and I would have been answerable to you. These two young people fell in love. They became close to each other. We were not taken into confidence when all this happened. Since we have no role in this entire issue, we are not obliged to answer anyone. My son has his own reasons for refusing now. I cannot forcibly get him married to your girl. You should have kept your girl under control before demanding an explanation from me. Did you make an effort to enquire who was she seeing? Today's youth thinks that it is their right to fall in love and they think it is the duty of the elders to support the same. This is something that you too are aware. When the entire matter was their personal matter, then ask yourself if it is right for me to interfere in their personal business? Inspite of my son

telling me that he has conveyed his decision to your daughter, I came here to cordially convey the same, because your daughter had personally approached me to help her out. I too have a daughter, so I understand everything and it is out sympathy for your girl that I am here," said Kalyani, sternly.

"I did not ask you for your sympathy," Shruti answered rudely.

"Ok. I repeat what I said earlier. Recommendations cannot make marriages or relationships work," said Kalyani while walking out.

Kalyani heard Shruti shout from behind, "Tell your son that he cannot get away so easily. I am not like other girls.I have all the proof with me. I can go to any length."

Kalyani stopped at the threshold, looked back sternly at Shruti and then continued walking away, while her mind was grappling with two thoughts: should she feel happy that her son had taken the right decision or should she as a woman feel happy that girls are outdoing boys?

*(*Tharumaru - *Katha Koumudhi, Sept 2013)*

16. Fragile – Handle With Care

The cell phone rang. Shilpa picked up her phone, lookedat the name of the caller and promptly switched it off. "Idiot", she muttered under her breathe. Akhila who was sitting beside her asked, "Who is it? Why did you switch off the phone? Is it Rahul? Poor thing! Why are you avoiding him?"

"You don't know anything. So please keep out of this," said Akhila, sounding irritated.

"Well! I know everything. Ever since I joined this call centre a year ago, I have seen the friendship between and you and Rahul evolve into proximity and intimacy. And now for the past one month I am watching you trying to avoid him. Why are you being so harsh with him. Just look at him. Fellow is looking run down. He is looking like a Romeo. Has he misbehaved with you? If he has then, I think you should have a frank talk with him," suggested Akhila.

"Please shut up Akhila. You will not understand. So just keep to yourself," retorted Shilpa.

"Fine! You don't want to talk about it. But pleaseremember that you will be the biggest loser if you let

go of a fine person like Rahul," said Akhila while getting off the cab at her drop point.

Bhavana who had joined the call centre just a week ago, looked bewildered. Sandeep, who was sitting in the front seat, turned back and said, "Shilpa! Why don't you have a talk with him? If there are any misunderstandings, you can clear them if you talk to him. There is no point in avoiding him."

"Shut up yaar! Don't give unsolicited advice!" snapped Shilpa. Sandeep was taken aback by the ferocity of her retort. Shilpa got down at her drop point.

* * *

The next day, Shilpa had completed her night shift and came out of her office. She was about to get into the cab, when Rahul suddenly appeared and caught hold of the cab door and calmly said, "Shilpa! I want to talk to you. Come with me. We will go on my bike." Shilpa was caught unawares. She angrily wrested her hand from his clutches and glared at him, "Are you aware that it is past midnight? And you want me to come with you on your bike, now? Are you crazy?"

"No! Not yet! There is a lot that I want to discuss with you. So come with me, right away", he said stubbornly.

"Just let go off my hand! If there is something that you want to discuss, we will have a talk tomorrow. Now please step aside." Rahul did not leave Shilpa's hand. He glared at her and was about to say something when Akhila intervened and tried to placate him by saying, "Rahul! Please! Do not create a scene here at this part of the night.Tomorrow you can have talk with her. Now please let us go. The driver is waiting."

"Akhila, tomorrow she will again avoid me. She will disconnect my calls or switch off the phone. She will not reply to my messages. She will not respond to my emails. She is deliberately trying to avoid me," he said angrily.

"No Rahul, she will not do this. I give my word on behalf of her. You tell me the place where you want to meet her tomorrow, and I will send her there. It's my promise," she said pleadingly.

"OK! Tomorrow I will meet her over lunch at Minerva." He took his hand off the cab door, started his bike and drove away without looking back.

"Idiot! How dare he come and create a scene at midnight! And you? Why did you tell him that you will send me to meet him tomorrow?" asked Shilpa.

"Don't be stupid! If I had not said that you will meet him tomorrow, he would have created an ugly scene here on the road and at this time of the night. Didn't you see he was drunk" said Akhila angrily after sitting in the cab. "Look Shilpa! Tomorrow when you meet Rahul, discuss everything frankly with him. In case you no longer wish to continue your friendship with him, then frankly tell him the reasons," suggested Akhila.

Shilpa answered, "Why is he not able to understand that I am not interested in him. Why is he stalking me? He tries to convince me, argues with me, and pleads with me. Oh God! It is getting unbearable" said Shilpa sounding vexed. Akhila looked at her surprised.

"What is the matter? Why is that you are suddenly no longer interested? It is not fair to avoid him without telling him the reason," said Ahila.

"My family has decided on a proposal from a boy who is settled in the USA. Rahul and I do not belong to the same caste. My family will never agree to this match. They disapproved of my friendship with him. I did not like his family. They are too old fashioned," said Shilpa.

"If that was the case, then you should have put an end to this friendship right in the beginning."

"He is an educated person. And a good person too. So I continued with this friendship. He was quite helpful too. But that does not mean that I should marry him," said Shilpa, going on the offensive.

"Shilpa! Don't give me all this crap. You think your relationship was mere harmless friendship? Don't I know the level of intimacy between you and Rahul? How is it you suddenly woke up to his different caste and old fashioned family? Now that you have a proposal from a NRI, you no longer want to have anything to do with Rahul, am I right?" asked Akhila, sarcastically.

"Well! You are entitled to your views," said Shilpa, arrogantly.

"At least now confess everything to Rahul," suggested Akhila, before getting off the cab. Shilpa could hardly sleep that night. She kept tossing from one side to the other, trying to find ways to handle Rahul. She finally fell asleep sometime before dawn.

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The next afternoon Akhila received a call from Rahul. "Akhila! Shilpa has refused to come to meet me," blurted Rahul over phone.

"Oh! She refused? Rahul, I think you should just forget her. When she is no longer concerned about you, I see no point in your pursuing her. Just put an end to this whole issue," said Ahkila, trying to pacify him. Rahul immediately disconnected the call, as if he was in no mood to listen to any advice from anyone.

It was five in the evening. Akhila came out to take the cab home. Her phone rang. It was Sandeep calling. Akhila answered the call. Sandeep sounded very disturbed. Without any delay he shouted into her ear, "Akhila, Rahul has thrown acid on Shilpa. One side of her face and neck are badly affected. She has been rushed to the hospital."

"Oh my God! When did this happen?"

"Fifteen minutes ago. Shilpa was walking towards to the cab point. Bhuvana and I were already seated in the cab. Bhuvana has informed Shilpa's parents. Shilpa has been shifted to the hospital. Her father has gone to lodge a complaint with the police," Sandeep said.

"Where is Rahul?" "He said that he going to the police station to surrender."

Oh! I am coming to the hospital."

* * *

Rahul reached the police station. "I threw acid on a girl about half an hour ago. Her face and neck are badly burnt. Her people have taken her to the hospital," confessed Rahul. The officer on duty got up from his chair and angrily caught hold of Rahul's collar and said, "Rascal! Do you know that you will be sent to jail for your crime?"

"Yes, I know. I know that I have committed a crime and am liable for punishment. I am ready for any punishment," said Rahul, calmly. The officer was surprised. He let go of Rahul's shirt collar.

"Who are you? And why did you do this?"

"My name is Rahul. I am an engineering graduate. Presently I am working in a call centre. My family consists of my parents and a younger sister. My father is a bank officer." The police inspector realised that Rahul was from a decent family. He softened a wee bit and asked sarcastically, "A love affair? Did she refuse to reciprocate your feelings? One sided love?"

"If she had spurned me right at the beginning, I would not have taken such a drastic step. We have known each other ever since we both this call centre. Our friendship blossomed into love. We both used to go out, became emotionally close and finally we got physically involved too. I have recklessly spent my hard earned money in taking her to movies, restaurants, outings, shopping malls, and buying her countless number of gifts. I come from a middle class family. My father took a loan from the bank to fund my education. Instead of helping him repay the loan, I squandered my earnings fooling around with her. I used to allow her to sleep while on duty and along with my work, I do her work too. I was hell bent on marrying her despite disapproval from the elders in my family. After all this, she is avoiding me for the past one month."

"You both work at the same place isn't it? Then how can she avoid you?"

"She got a better offer a month ago and she has moved there. I think she deliberately changed jobs, just to avoid me and harass me."

"So, does that call for throwing acid on? Or bring out knives? What's wrong with today's youth? Where are you people headed for? If you have truly loved her, then why did you such a horrendous thing?" asked the inspector.

"I could not bear the neglect and the betrayal".

"You have been very rash. Have you ever thought that this could destroy your life forever?"

"Sir, I am not concerned about myself. But I had to teach her a lesson. Sir, do not underestimate these girls. They sweet talk the boys and seduce them, exploit them financially and emotionally and when they want no longer want to have to do anything with them, they treat them as disposable things."

"This is the problem with you all. You do not know the difference between infatuation and love, then you go astray and destroy your lives. You are forgetting that your parents are your well-wishers and that you should be taking them into..."

"It is something that I realised very late. That is why I have destroyed my life so that my life becomes a lesson to many young men like. My love has destroyed me. This is what the youth has to realise."

"You are so naive. You should realise that love is part of life, but love is not your entire life. If you think that love is life, then you are sadly mistaken."

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"Doctor, has the patient regained consciousness? I have to record her statement," asked the inspector.

"Don't strain her. She is still in a state of shock," answered the doctor. The inspector nodded his head and went into the ward.

"Is there anything you would like to say with regard to this incident?" asked the inspector.

"What is there left to say, after that criminal, threw acid on my daughter in the broad daylight and then came and surrendered himself to the police?" said Venkat Rao, Shilpa's father, seething with anger.

"Why did Rahul do this? Did you have any fight with him? What led to his becoming so vengeful?" asked the police inspector, pretending as if he did not know anything. Shilpa opened her eyes. She did not know what to say. She started crying and said, "Please don't ask me anything. I cannot tell you anything."

The inspector persisted. He asked, "I was told that you both were colleagues and friends too. I was also told that you were very close to each other. Then why did Rahul do such a thing?" Shilpa started weeping uncontrollably.

"Sir, I think you should be interrogating that rascal, and not my daughter. You should jail all those scoundrels who stalk girls, harass them and when the girls do not show any interest, then these demented creatures throw acid on them, like this criminal did," said Venkat Rao, raging with anger.

The inspector turned to Venkat Rao and said, "Sir, I understand your anger. But the boy is not to be blamed

entirely. Your daughter is partly responsible for what has happened. Now-a-days girls are enjoying unbridled freedom in the name of jobs and career. They befriend boys and go to movies, outings, parties and generally have a good time. Due to this intimacy, the boys tend to get emotionally involved and their expectations start growing day by day. Can the boys alone be blamed for this? Some girls wilfully exploit these boys, both emotionally and financially and later start ignoring them, before finally dumping them. Some boys cannot get over such exploitation and then they turn violent, like this boy Rahul."

"Are you justifying their criminal behaviour? Are they right in killing or maiming the girls? These days, girls are also highly qualified. If they are friendly with their male colleagues, does it automatically mean that they are willing to marry these boys? You as a police officer are expected to rein in such criminals. On the contrary you seem to taking up their cause and justifying their behaviour. This is very unbecoming of you, inspector," said Venkat Rao, glaring the policeman.

"Yes sir. It is our job to rein in such violent behaviour. I am certainly not denying it. All that we are saying is that girls ought to be careful. Girls can be friendly. But they should know where to draw the line. They should be friendly with all, and not demonstrate greater interest in any one particular person. If the girls learn to carry themselves in a dignified manner, then no boy would dare to cross theline.It is only when the girls give them the levy that the boys try to get intimate, and start chasing girls in the name of love. As the father you know your daughter and what was going on in her life. You should have cautioned her beforehand. I have

gathered all the information about these two, their friendship, intimacy and their affair. This boy became violent because he was exploited and then dumped for an US based boy. I am not saying all this to condone his act. No person will ever condone such violent behaviour, least of all, the police force. The boy will any way be punished. He came and surrendered himself and I could detect that he did this because he was badly hurt. That's why I am telling you all this. It is not your daughter's future that has got destroyed, but it's this boy's life. I am not denying that there are boys who harass girls, demand love and if the girls spurn their overtures,they resort to violence. Such fellows certainly deserve to be punished. But in this case, it is your daughter who is at fault. Please remember that," said the officer and stormed out.

The next day's newspapers dedicated a lot of news space to this story. The electronic media telecast the entire incident. Rahul was produced in the courtof law. The judge heard the arguments and within a few hours, pronounced a revolutionary verdict.

The gist of the judgement was that Rahul will be punished for having physically harmed Shilpa and destroyed her future. He will have to face two kinds of punishments. The first one will be that, after Shilpa is discharged from the hospital, he will have to marry her. In case Shilpa refuses to marry him, he will have to undergo two years of rigorous imprisonment.

The judge addressed the people in the court and said, "I have fast tracked this case because I want to send out a message that such cases should not be allowed drag on for years, so that the perpetuators of such heinous crimes are not allowed to tamper with the evidence and go scot free.

Public memory is short. Hence investigation should be completed quickly and the culprits punished immediately. This will instil the fear of law and punishment in potential criminals. Through this platform, I request the future judges to keep in mind that they can help bring a change in the youth who are vulnerable to passion crimes." The court resounded with the claps of the gathering who hailed the verdict.

The newspapers and TV channels carried the news. Rahul's decision to undergo imprisonment was widely covered and discussed and debated. Rahul had said that he opted for imprisonment because young men like him who act in haste deserve to go to jail.

Shilpa was lying on the hospital bed and watching the entire proceedings live. After listening to the jury, she cried, "No! Don't punish him. I should be punished."

"Shilpa, wake up! What happened? Some nightmare? Why are you shouting? C'mon get up. Otherwise you will be late for office," said Shilpa's mother, trying to wake her daughter. Shilpa woke up with a start. She looked at herself and then looked around.

'Oh God! What a nightmare! What if Rahul does something of this sort? Where will that leave her? Please Rahul! Forgive me. I have to meet Rahul and explain that we cannot live happily if our elders do not consent to our marriage. I will convince him that it is better to part as friends.' Shilpa started getting ready for office while thinking of ways to pacify and convince Rahul.

*(*Manasutho Aadaku - *Chitra, (Monthly) 2009)*

17. Live And Let Live

"I forgot to bring the water bottle," said Sujatha to herhusband before going out of their bedroom. She returned with the water bottle and with a scowl on her face banged the door shut.

Prasad saw her angry expression and asked, "What happened?"

Sujatha was in no mood to answer her husband. She turned her face away angrily. Prasad asked her again, "What is the matter?"

"People should behave according to their age. I shouldn't have gone to fetch the bottle," she replied sharply.

"Stop beating around the bush," said Prasad sounding a bit irritated.

"Go and see for yourself. Watch the old folks romancing each other shamelessly that too in the hall," said Sujatha repulsively.

Prasad laughed and said, "That's all! I was thinking that it is something very serious. It is not fair on your part to call my parents as old folks. My father retired recently. He is just 58 years old. In fact, now-a-days it is seen as middle age.

Poor things! They don't have a room for themselves. When they manged to get some privacy, you entered like a villain."

"Please don't give such explanations. Elders should behave in a dignified manner. Not like this, in a cheap manner…"

"Suja, they are man and wife. They are not doing anything wrong. Why do you have to be so critical of them? We should have given them the children's room and asked the children to sleep in the hall. It is our fault that we did not do so."

"Yes, Poor things! At this age they need privacy. Children who are studying do not need any privacy,, replied Sujatha sarcastically.

"OK. Go to sleep now. They will somehow manage. That is not your problem," said Prasad and switched off the light.

Kamalamma was felt embarrassed. She said, "Our daughter-in-law saw us together and I think she certainly didn't like it."

"I didn't get you."

"You are shameless. You are growing old, but you still behave like a young man. How can you behave like this, that too in the hall?" Kamalamma said while looking at her husband angrily.

"What is it that we have done that we should feel so embarrassed? You are lying on your bed and I am sitting beside you and chatting. What's wrong in this? There is no age limit for romancing one's wife. Why should anyone have any objection? It is our life. And we will live it on our terms. In

fact, I feel very uncomfortable sleeping in the hall. It is our bad luck. We do not have a home of our own. We have no other options but to stay with our son", said Ram Murthy in a dejected tone. "Ok!

Now switch of the light and go to sleep", said Kamalamma before turning on her other side.

* * *

"Uncle! This evening I will come to your office. I want to talk to you. Please wait for me. This is urgent," said Prasad over the phone.

"What is the matter? Shall I come to your house this evening. I can also meet your father," asked Sambasiva Rao.

"No! You don't come to my place. I will come to your office. Kindly wait for me."

Prasad met Sambasiva Rao at the latter's office. They both sat in the canteen sipping coffee. Sambasiva Rao was surprised when he heard what Prasad told him. "Why did your father take such a sudden decision? What was the trigger? Are there any misunderstandings between you all at home?"

"Not really! We all have been living under one roof for the past one year. Father has suddenly taken this decision and I am feeling very miserable. I had asked him several times as to why he took such a decision. He just announced his plan of action. He is just not willing to listen to me. Since you are dad's close friend I thought I should seek your help. Maybe he will listen to you. I hope you will talk to him and make him change his mind. How can he decide to go and stay in an old age home when I am still here. Would the

society not accuse me of having driven way my parents to an old age home? Why is he unable to understand that? Nothing so untoward has happened now to make him to resort to this kind of decision. Uncle, you please talk to him. Maybe then he will open up and tell you the reason."

"I will come right away. Do I need an auspicious hour to talk to your father? You have your two wheeler with you, isn't it? Take me to your place," said Sambasiva Rao

"It's been a long time since you came home. How are you?" asked Ram Murthy. Ram Murthy guessed the reason for his friend's unannounced arrival when he saw Sambasiva Rao was accompanied by Prasad.

"I cannot come whenever I feel like since I am not yet retired. I have come to see you since your son has complained against you. I have been told that you have taken a great decision."

"So you have come as my son's ambassador" said Ram Murthy, looking at his son.

"Uncle has not come to talk on my behalf. I requested him to talk to you with the hope that atleast he will be able to talk you out your decision" answered Prasad sullenly.

"Why have you taken such a decision? Your son is terribly hurt by your decision."

"I understand. I wish to take you to a particular place tomorrow at nine o' clock in the morning. Can you make it? We can have a talk there. I will clear all your doubts. I will come 8.30. Be ready."

"Tomorrow being Sunday, I can come with you. Tell me,

where are you planning to take me?" asked Sambasiva Rao, barely concealing his curiosity.

"Don't ask me the details now. Let's talk about other things now," said Ram Murthy cheerfully.

Kamalamma came with a cup of coffee for Sambasiva Rao. While handing over the cup she smilingly asked, "How are you? You have come after a long time."

"I will join the rank of my friend in another four months. After that I will have all the time in the world. I heard that my friend had taken a great decision. Did he take you into confidence before taking this decision?" asked Sambasiva Rao.

Kamalamma looked askance at her husband. He just laughed away without a care in the world.

"We do not think that it is a great decision. But we certainly believe that it is a smart decision" answered Kamalamma.

"Oh! I see! So it was a decision taken jointly. My friend has prolonged the suspense till tomorrow. Anyway, I have no other option but to wait till tomorrow." He finished drinking his coffee and got up to take leave of his friend and his family.

* * *

The next day morning, at nine o' clock, a bus left the premises of RamaKrishna Mutt. "Are you taking me to 'RamaKrishna Ashram'? asked Sambasiva Rao after settling down in the bus.

"Oh! So you know about this ashram? They have an ashram at Keesara Gutta. Every Sunday a bus leaves from

here to the ashram. I will show around the ashram and then I am sure that you will agree that my decision is right. I wanted to ask you to accompany me so that you could take a look. Even before I could invite you my son already sounded you on this issue."

"What made you take this decision?"

"We want to lead a peaceful life, without any worries or troubles. Why should we stay with our children and make their life and our lives complicated? You see, everyone needs a roof over their head. Unfortunately, I could not buy a house even while I was in service."

"Yes, it is increasingly becoming difficult for middle class people to buy a house. Your son is very sad that you have decided to move to an old age home as if you are a destitute. He is terribly hurt."

Ram Murthy laughed sardonically. "He is worried about the reaction of the world and he is also worried because he will have to face a lot of problems if my wife and I leave. Today's generation is more concerned about themselves and least bothered about their parents. With more and more women taking up jobs, the importance of old parents has proportionately increased. Grandmothers and grandfathers are needed to guard their homes, take care of the children, help in household chores and turn tutors for the grandchildren. So you see that wanting to have old parents living with them is very profitable indeed for today's children. Above all they can leave their children in the custody of their parents and both wife and husband can go out and earn money. That's is why our children have realised the value of their parents."

"Then why did you take such a decision when they have realised your importance?"

"I will tell you the reason. This house is like a prison for us. There are only two bedrooms. My son occupies one bedroom and the grandchildren occupy the other. My wife and I have to stay out in the hall. We are fed up with this apartment life. We feel claustrophobic. In olden days, elderly people used to relax in the verandas. They used to read the newspapers and books, chat with passers-by, do some gardening, or just walk around the house. Women used to gather in the courtyard and chat while going about their household work. They used play indoor games or read the Ramayana or the Mahabharata. That is how they kept themselves busy. People used to move around freely. Though they all lived in big joint families, they did not feel claustrophobic. They had sprawling gardens or backyards Grandparents used to keep the grandchildren occupied while the daughters-in-law went about their household duties. The grandparents not only played with the children but also taught them morals and ethics. But now we have to live in a small house. The two diwans in the hall turn into our beds during the night. The children need privacy to study so they have been given a room. There is not enough leg space in the hall. It becomes all the more inconvenient when my son's friends come visiting. Even the visitors find it uncomfortable. Amidst all this, it is my wife who is suffering the most. She is burdened with household chores. After she came to my home as a bride, she had to take care of the in-laws, relatives, visitors. Later she had to look after my children. Now she has to take care of the grandchildren. I feel so sorry for her. My daughter-in-

law has to leave home by eight in the morning. She helps my wife before leaving. But the entire burden is on my wife. She has to supervise the maid, and if the maid does not turn up she has to do the entire work. She has to cook, clean and generally take care of everything. She manages to relax for a while in the afternoon before the children are back from school. My daughter is back only after seven. So the onus of making dinner again is on my wife. When will she ever get the much deserved rest…?"

"That's true. But we are big support for our children and they are our support too. Isn't it?"

"It all sounds very nice. We took care of our children because we had youth and energy on our side. And then it was undeniably our responsibility. Retirement means that it is time to relax and enjoy all that we couldn't do earlier. We can go and watch movies, attend song and dance recitals, visit temples. Though we would like to do these things it has become impossible since we are like prisoners of the responsibilities that have been thrust on our heads. We are burdened with household work in the morning. We are busy again in the evening before and after the children are back. We cannot leave the children unattended and go out. It becomes night by the time my daughter-in-law is back. There is no point in going out after dark. My son advises us to go out when the children have holidays. But theywould have already made plans to go out. And we are never a part of their plans or outings. I cannot shamelessly ask them to take us along. They are a family and they would like to bond with each other. They never think about the parents. How long can one keep oneself engaged with books or TV programmes?

We cannot watch the TV when the children are around because we would be disturbing their studies. We should watch only after they leave. Many times some very good programmes are telecast in the afternoons or at prime time. My wife misses all those programmes which interest her and she cannot watch them because she will be disturbing the children. If ever my wife switches on the TV, my daughter-in-law immediately tells her to watch it while keeping it on the mute mode. On the weekends when the children are at home they watch cartoons all day long and there is no way that we can lay our hands on the remote. All these things might appear trivial to you, but you will understand the gravity of the situation only when you experience the same."

"We wish to go on a pilgrimage in the South. 'How can you go now? Please go during summer vacations,' my son exclaimed. We cannot travel during the hot summer months. So we had to drop the plans. The city hosts many plays and musical concerts. My wife and I can happily go and watch them. But that is not possible, because we have guard the house and take care of the children. At this point in life we would like to relax and indulge in all those things which we could not when we were younger. We don't know when our lives will come to end. We may live for another ten years or fifteen or may be twenty years. But this is not to say that we are very old. We too have some desires, some wishes that we would like to fulfil. I don't think I am being wrong in talking in this manner. We cannot even communicate freely with each other. We do not have a room for ourselves. We have no privacy whatsoever. The other day my daughter-in-law clearly expressed her disapproval when she found me and my wife

indulging in light banter. She made us feel that we doing something that was illicit or forbidden. I am not yet sixty. Why should I forego these little pleasures now that I have some leisure on my side? When the children were young, we took care them. After they grew up, we fulfilled all their responsibilities. Now am I wrong in asking for some rest and leisure? Have I taken a wrong decision by planning to move out?" asked Ram Murthy. Sambasiva Rao nodded his head as if to say that the decision was not wrong.

"Why didn't you clearly explain all this to your son?"

"I did. Though not in so many words. I told him that we want to live life at our own pace. We would like to be free from responsibilities and live on our terms and in a place where we will be comfortable. I also told him that I took this decision only to lead a retired life in its true sense. He was upset because our absence will create a lot of problems for them. They will have to be on their own. Anyway he will get used to it. Are all working couples in this world blessed enough to the help of elders in their families? It is people like us who have no roof over our heads who are forced to live with their children. I draw some pension. The Provident Fund and Gratuity are already with me. I have paid an amount of Rs One lakh and bought a room here. The rest is safely deposited in the bank which I can depend on for everyday expenditure. I have to pay fifteen hundred each per month for our meals. I might have to spend another thousand rupees per month for miscellaneous expenditure. People who cannot afford even this much are left with no other option but to spend the rest of their lives at the mercy of their children. That way we seem to be far better placed. I have taken this decision in

order to avoid becoming a burden on anybody. This move will ensure that all of us have our individual space."

"You are right. One should not become a burden on anyone."

"Please convey this to my son that I took this decision not because we are angry with him. It is not my intention to hurt him. Nobody is going to find fault with him or accuse him of letting go of his parents. Even if they do, it will be for a short period of time. My son and his family will certainly have to face some problems. But I am sure they will get used to it and finally find a way out. The concept of joint families and apartment culture in the cities is simply not possible. We are feeling constrained by this kind of atmosphere. So kindly convince my son that we are moving to place that will provide us with clean air soothing ambience and peace of mind."

Ram Murthy and Sambasiva Rao were so engrossed in their conversation that they did not realise that they had already reached the ashram. The ashram was situated in the middle of huge sprawling open place. A small prayer hall and the office were beside the ashram. The bus entered the gate and then came to a gentle halt.

"Let us first go to the office," said Ram Murthy leading the way.

The person sitting in the office recognised Ram Murthy and welcomed him.

"When are you coming?" he asked.

"There are a few things to be taken care of like changing the address in my pension paper, informing the post office

and the bank of the change in the address. I amhopeful of shifting here by the 1st of next month. This is my friend, Sambasiva Rao. I brought him along to show him the ashram," said Ram Murthy while introducing his friend.

"Please show him around. In the mean time I will order some tea," the manager said.

Ram Murthy took his friend on a guided tour of the ashram. Each room was furnished with two beds, a table and a chair. There was a veranda adjoining the room. An attached bathroom was also provided. It was good enough for a couple. Some couples had kept stoves in the veranda to brew their morning tea or coffee. There was kitchen in the ashram had big gas stoves. There was spacious dining hall where atleast 25 to 30 people could partake their meals at a time. There was a recreation room where one could read newspapers, magazines, play caroms and chess. The inmates were provided tea and breakfast at 7.30 AM. Lunch consisted of a wet and dry curry, rice, pickles and curds. At 4 PM tea, biscuits and a fruit were supplied. Dinner was served at 7.30 PM. The menu for dinner consisted of rotis, curry, rice cereals etc. There was room service facility too for those were unable to come to the dining hall. There was a small temple at a little distance where about 50 people at a time could sit and pray or sing bhajans or meditate. There was enough space for walking too. There was a small garden in front of the office. All around on could find huge trees. On the whole it was a very pleasant and inviting place.

"Very soothing! It was pleasant here, away from the city traffic and the madding crowds," said Sambasiva Rao feeling very relaxed and contented.

"Yes, you are right! The moment I saw this place I just felt that it is a perfect place to spend the rest of my life. Conveyance is not a problem if ever I feel like going to the city since there is bus facility. I can easily visit my children and other relatives whenever I feel like. My wife and I have each other for company. What else do I need? We can have our own space and privacy. We need feel that we are dependent on our children and our children need not feel that we are burden on them. Am I right?" asked Ram Murthy. Sambasiva Rao nodded his head in agreement. He seemed to be mighty impressed. Both the friends had their lunch at the ashram and by evening they were back in the city.

Prasad met Sambasiva Rao the next day and asked, "What did my father say? Did he tell the reason?"

Sambasiva Rao laughed and answered, "I too am planning to book a room for myself there. It is so peaceful there."

Anxiety and impatience were writ large on Prasad's face. Sambasiva Rao patted Prasad's shoulder and said, "Look Prasad, times have changed. There is a change in parents' outlook. They do not wish to depend on anyone once they have fulfilled their responsibilities. They want to fulfil all those desires which they could not while they were busy with their responsibilities."

"Have we denied them anything? Do they have unfulfilled desires?"

"No one is saying that you denied them anything."

"Then…?"

"Please listen to me. This apartment culture does not

have space for old parents. Those who have no other option have to live a compromised life, neglected and abused by their children. Fortunately, your father has the wherewithal to provide for himself and your mother. That is why he has taken this decision. You are neither to be blamed nor should you feel hurt by this decision. You need worry about the reaction of the society either. You have to take care of your wife, children and shoulder the responsibility of your family. You have to look at other person's point of view too. If you place yourself in your father's shoes, you will realise that he is right. 'Live and Let Live' is a policy that is applicable to all times. So, don't unnecessarily get worried or worked up. They are physically away from you. That does not mean that it is 'out of sight is out of mind.' You can always visit them. In the same way, they too will visit you, your wife and their grandchildren whenever they feel like. 'Distance makes the heart fonder.' Please never forget that proverb," concluded Sambasiva Rao, patting Prasad's shoulder.

*(*Ma Bathuku Made - *Gruha Shobha. May, 2005)*

18. The Milk Of Human Kindness

Kavitha did not understand what the doctor had justsaid, H.I.V. The doctor elaborated and said, 'AIDS' while showing the reports.

Kavitha was shocked. All that she could do was to stare at the doctor. Gradually her eyes welled up and she started crying silently.

"Don't cry. You need get scared. Now we have lot medicines to help you fight this disease. The government will give medicines free of cost. If you take those medicines regularly and supplement them with nutritious food like milk, eggs, fruits, and also do some walking and such other physical exercise, then you should be fine." The doctor handed over the reports and also directed her to the counter that distributes medicines. Before Kavitha could take leave, the doctor tried to counsel her saying, "Remember that if you want to fight HIV, what you need is immunity, i.e. physical strength. Then this disease will disappear. First and foremost you need to get rid of the fear of this disease from your mind. This disease is like any other disease. You can be cured. AIDS does not always mean death."

'Milk, eggs, fruits, nutritious food- all these for a person who can barely afford gruel! If only she had the money to buy all these things, she would not have got this disease. May be the doctor could not guess that I can keep my body and soul together only if I sell my body. One can always argue saying that not all poverty stricken women sell their bodies. They do other kinds of works to survive. I did not get into this profession out of choice. I got into this after I was left with no other way. It is only after getting into this, I realised that I was got stuck in a quagmire and there was no way out of this hell. But I deserve this! Girls like me who defy their parents and come out into this big bad world deserve this.' These were the thoughts racing through Kavitha's mind as she listlessly walked towards the medicines counter.

The doctor called after her and said, "People think this is an infectious disease. That is not right. This disease spreads through sex or blood transfusion. Take care of these two issues. Don't go around crying or making lot of noise about it. Otherwise people will start boycotting you. Keep in mind the things I have told you and then you can be cured." Kavitha thanked her and walked out.

'Of the two things, I can avoid one. But what about the other one? The other is her lifeline. How can I survive ...' Vengeance, anger, frustration, tears, helplessness welled up in her. Anger against the menfolk! She wanted to mercilessly exterminate men as one does with bedbugs. She wanted to kill all those men who brought her to this stage. 'Kill them like one kills lice. Trample the entire tribe called men. Be as ruthless and inhuman as one can be.' She was seething with impotent rage, tears streaming down her cheeks. She made

no effort to wipe her tears. She plodded her way to her room, unlocked the door and flung herself across the bed, tired and completely drained out.

Kanakam, who lived next door, heard the door being unlocked and came to see Kavitha. "Oh! You are back. Did they give the report? What did the doctor say? What did they say when you told them that you are feeling weak?" she asked anxiously. Kavitha slowly opened her eyes and said, "Please give me some water." She did not have the strength even to sit upright. "You left without eating anything. Here, Drink some water. I will get something for you to eat," said Kanakam, handed over a glass of water and left. She came back with a plate of rice and watery tomato dal. "Get up! First eat this," she said. Kavitha hungrily gulped down the food and felt a little better. She thanked Kanakam with tears in her eyes and said, "I have no one to call my own, except you." Kanakam replied, "We both have each other. People like us cannot expect anything more."

Kanakam continued, "Ok. Now tell me, what did the doctor say? For the three months they have been making you wait for the reports and sending you away with some medicines. Did they give you any medicines now?"

Kavitha was silent for a minute. Then she raised her face and looked at Kanakam and said, "Nothing unusual. They said that since that I am very weak, I have to eat eggs, fruits and milk and such other nutritious foods. They gave me medicines. They said they will continue to give medicines. They also asked me to come periodically for tests. They said that if I remain weak, then I may get some disease. I barely have enough money to make both ends meet and they expect

me eat eggs and fruits! How can I afford all these things Kanakam?" This was like telling the poor to eat cakes when they can hardly afford bread! Kavithacontinued in a depressed tone, "Kanakam, what kind of a wretched life is this? I am beginning to hate myself. How many times I have wished for death, but even death seems to despise the very thought of touching me."

"Ok! We have had this discussion any number of times, but could we find a way to end our misery? I am going to take some rest now.Otherwise how will we do our night shift?" Kanakam said jovially and walked away.

Kavitha slipped into deep sleep, tired after the long walk in the hot sun and thanks to the food that she had. She was unaware of the time....

Kavitha was troubled by nightmares even in her deep sleep. Jackals, hyenas, vultures.Well! they were men wearing the masks. These animals! They were snarling, baring their teeth, falling on her, tearing off her clothes, ripping off her flesh, biting into her bones, drinking her blood... pain, anguish, fear, she is trying to escape, shouting, screaming, and she woke up drenched in sweat. In the darkness she found a man trying to foist himself on her ... she kicked him hard in his stomach, "Bastard... who the hell are you... get lost you son of a ...."

"You bloody ... How dare you kick me?" the man said, dragging her by her hair.

"You think I am your wife that you straight away come and sleep with me? Get out you bastard," she screamed like the one possessed, while getting up from her bed.

"What? You think I came here without paying for you? That Kanakam took Rs 50 from me and sent me to you. Give me back my money. Females like are available for ten rupees!" he shouted. "You gave her the money and take the money from her. I am not well today. Go!" she shouted and collapsed on her bed.

'What kind of a cursed life is this?' she asked herself. In this state of mind and body too, she is forced to do this kind of a thing... 'I should die. There is no point in leading this kind of a miserable life.I have seen the worst in this short period of my life. This AIDS will anyway finish me. The doctor always says the there is no need to lose hope, that I should fight back bravely. It is so easy to offer platitudes. From where will garner courage? Money gives strength and courage. You need money for everything. I lead this despicable life to earn money and finally look where I am?' Again she slipped into deep slumber. Her past started playing out in he dreams. "Kavitha! Wait! Can't you hear me calling you?". It was Ravi calling her from behind. Ravi used to wait for her, with his bicycle, in the mango orchard, everyday, waylaying her on her way back from school. "Let go of my hand. Otherwise I will shout. Why are you stalking me? Please go away! I said 'let me go'.... Her resistance was gradually wearing out. She fell in love with his persistence. She had kept him at an arm's distance for two months, but he never gave up his chase. He happily put up with her anger and resistance and she finally found herself getting closer, both emotionally and physically surrendered herself to Ravi. The love affair that started when she was in ninth standard continued till her tenth class final exams... their secret rendezvous in the mango orchard... on

one hand she was enamoured of Ravi's bravado and on the other hand she was scared that neighbours will get a whiff of the affair and inform her mother... ultimately that which she was scared of took place.

She was beaten, abused and severe restrictions were placed on her movements. She failed in her final exams. Ravi suggested that they elope. Kavitha was initially scared. She finally agreed and she eloped with Ravi. After a sometime, the ardour wore off and she landed in the place where such gullible young girls who have no one to call her own, end up. She had cursed herself any number of times for having fallen into the trap laid by Ravi. She had landed up in a brothel by the time she realised that infatuation was a short lived feeling. She had no means of earning money except by selling her body. As a result, she contracted sexually transmitted diseases, and now...' she was sobbing in her sleep. She woke up, her cheeks wet with tears. She realised that there was no one to console her and that made her cry inconsolably. 'I should not cry. I should seek revenge against all those men who brought her to this stage. I should torture them and derive sadistic pleasure. They have abused and exploited my body. And the only way to get back at them was to pass on this deadly disease to them. I should watch them wilt, suffer and die a lingering and painful death.' She wiped her tears. She had made up her mind. She pulled out the reports from under the pillow and tried to comprehend the report with whatever little knowledge she had of the English alphabets. 'Yes! This is my weapon. And I am going to use this weapon to punish men.' She decided that she will not take the medicines. Instead she was firm on passing on this disease to the men who come to her and then

watch them die a miserable death. 'Now she will enact the dance of death. These men will contract the disease from and then gradually wither away, fully aware of what they were suffering from! They completely deserve this!'

"Kavitha, wake up! You have been sleeping since yesterday afternoon. Now it is morning. Last night I sent you a customer and you kicked him out. I sent him because you said you have no money with you. Don't you need money to survive? And the doctor has asked you to eat nutritious food and how will afford that kind of food if don't earn money?" asked Kanakam angrily, while handing a glass of tea. Kavitha did not reply. She sat quiet, sipping the tea.

"I kicked him out because I was feeling very weak and I was scared of the rogue," replied Kavitha, apologetically.

"Ok. I am going to the market to buy provisions. Do you want me get anything for you?"

"I don't have money," she murmured. "It's ok. I will bring whatever you want. You give me the money later," said Kanakam and walked out.

Kanakam came back with provisions and found Kavitha's room scattered with torn medical reports and medicines. Kavitha was sitting and drying her hair.

"What is this? You have thrown away the medicines. And you have torn the reports. How will the doctors continue the treatment if you do not show them the reports," asked Kanakam, anxiously. Kavitha replied in a detached tone, "I will not consult the doctors anymore and neither will I take the medicines. That's why I threw them away."

"What!" asked a perplexed Kanakam.

"I no longer wish to live. I do not the strength left in me to fight against all odds. I will offer all the pleasure to those men who come to seek it from me. I will make them realise that what they get is not pleasure, but punishment for their promiscuity," she said, with clenched teeth, her eyes brimming with vengeance. "I wish to donate my property to the men who come to me."

"Property? What are you saying."

"Before we die, don't we donate whatever we can?"

Kanakam was aghast on seeing the sadistic pleasure on Kavitha's face. She asked anxiously, "Kavitha, what are you saying? Are you OK?"

"I am fine. Anyway it is beyond your understanding," she replied laughing gaily.

"Kanakam, shall I tell you a secret. Shall I tell you the name of the disease I am suffering from? Promise me that you will not distance yourself from me if I tell you about my disease."

Kanakam eyes were downcast. "I know what you are suffering from? I understood when I saw your medical reports for the first time."

"You know? How do you know?"

"I know because I am suffering from the same disease. I kept this fact hidden, because everyone will exile me and customers will stop coming to me." "So in spite of knowing that you are HIV... you are...." said Kavitha disbelievingly.

Kavitha answered carelessly, "Let the scoundrels suffer! How does that concern me? I need my money. Are they not using us for their pleasure? So then why should we bother about them?"

Kavitha sat down distraught. "I have to cook. Why should we bother about anyone? Let us enjoy life as long as we live. The rest of the things are of no concern to us. Anyway, here's your provision's bill," said Kanakam and walked into her room.

Kavitha could not sleep that night. She kept tossing and turning all night. 'Am I right in my thinking? Why am I thinking in this way? Is it fair to seek revenge by passing on this disease? Can I really do such an inhuman thing? But that's exactly what Kanakam is doing. One really does not know how many like Kanakams, knowingly and may be since they have no choice, or unknowingly are spreading this life threatening disease. And the disease is spreading very fast. I would have infected at least fifty men or maybe even a hundred. Oh God! What is happening?' she thought.

She suddenly remembered Karim's wife and son who had died a year ago. Karim was a lorry driver. He was alcoholic. He contracted HIV and was reduced to a skeleton. Medical tests proved that he had passed on this disease to his wife and from the mother the son too contracted the same. The people in their locality panicked. They all rushed to the hospital to undergo tests. The tests showed that a couple of men were carrying the disease. They immediately took remedial steps and managed to keep themselves going. Now 'Kanakam and I... and from both of us to how many people....'

'The decision to seek revenge against at the men who exploited them for their pleasure will not end at punishing the men alone. It will turn fatal even for innocent women and children who have not wronged them in any way. It will be a crime not only against the innocents, but the future generations too. The thirst for revenge is sadistic and inhuman,' she thought.

She looked at the torn pieces of her medical reports. 'They might issue the reports again if I request them.' She picked up the tablets that she had earlier thrown away. Kanakam who had just come in, was surprised.

"Kanakam, Yadamma had asked for a care taker for an old woman who is staying alone. Did she find anyone?" asked Kavitha.

"I don't know. Anyway, why are you asking?"

"Wait. I will find out from Yadamma," said Kavitha, before walking out of her room.

*(*Manavathvam Maruvaku - *Asha Deepam.- An anthologhy on HIV-AIDS-2014)*